
SEPT.
25¢
STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—
PLANET
stories
TRADE MARK REG.
A.N.C.
Empires start piddly. One grew from
mutiny in the hold of a Gerzuni slave-sh
The STAR PLUNDERE
Novelet by POUL ANDERSO
Easy enough to land on Onzar IV. But Thane had to mortgage the Allied Worlds to stay alive on the terror-planet. . . .
EVIL out of ONZAR
Novel of the Galactic Wars
by MARK GANES
Also
Edwin James
Charles Saphro
Robt. Moore Williams

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!



After Ten Months Plays in Bond

I had no idea I would accomplish so much musically. After only ten months I was playing in bands. I now am employed in a music store as an instructor. This I owe to your marvelously simple lessons.

*R. C., Paterson, New Jersey



Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.

*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.



Lots of Fun

The progress I have made is thrilling. I'm on Lesson Seven and tossing off "Little Buttercup" like a maestro. The course is easy and what is most important—lots of fun.

*B. B., Jr., Hartford, Connecticut



Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.

*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

You, too, can play any instrument By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 850,000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good time popularity and profit.

Costs Only Few Cents a Day

And that's what you can do, right now. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument—quickly, easily, in spare time at home for only a few cents a day. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge, training or talent. Just read the fascinating booklet and Print and Picture sample that fully explain all about the famous U. S. School method. Instruments supplied when needed cash or credit. If interested tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. U. S. School of Music, Dept. B1706, Port Washington, L. I., N. Y. (54th year)

FREE!

Print and Picture SAMPLE

NOTICE

Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear." We teach you easily and quickly to play *real music*, any music by standard notes—not by any trick or number system.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC—Dept. B1706
Port Washington, L. I., New York

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet "How to Learn Music at Home," and your Free Print and Picture Sample.

☐ Piano	☐ Trumpet, Cornet	☐ Modern Elementary Harmony
☐ Guitar	☐ Reed Organ	
☐ Hawaiian Guitar	☐ Tenor Banjo	☐ Practical Finger Control
☐ Violin	☐ Ukulele	
☐ Piano Accordion	☐ Clarinet	☐ Mandolin
☐ Saxophone	☐ Trombone	
	☐ Flute, Piccolo	

Mr.
Mrs. _____ Have you Instrument? _____
Miss (Please print)

Address _____

City _____ State _____

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.



VOL. 5, NO. 8 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • SEPTEMBER, 1952

▸ *Novel of Galactic Wars*

EVIL OUT OF ONZAR **Mark Ganes** 4

A vast, grand prize lay within a parsec of the ambitious orphan system of Onzar—the major warp-lines of space crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Worlds and Darzent Empire. . . . Skyward, hungry legions!

▸ *Three Star-Flung Novelets*

ZERO DATA **Charles Saphro** 30

All the fabulous electronic witchery of the 21st century couldn't pin guilt on irreproachable Lonnie Raichi. But Jason, the cop, was sweating it out, searching for that fourth, final and all-knowing rule that would knock Lonnie's sublime "triple ethic" for a gala loop.

THE STAR PLUNDERER **Poul Anderson** 54

"One ship, and you're planning an empire in the Galaxy? That was exactly the plan of a handful of desperate men.

THE SLAVES OF VENUS **Edwin James** 90

The planet-wrecker rocketed his peculiar brand of freedom to the green swampmen of Venus—and prayed for one unholy miracle.

▸ *Short Stories from Beyond the Moon*

THE GUN **Philip K. Dick** 46

Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent. The planet was dead. Only the gun showed signs of life.

THOMPSON'S CAT **Robt. M. Williams** 70

Forgotten in the panic was Thompson's wise cat as the spaceship hurtled toward the sun . . . and certain death.

BIG PILL **Raymond Z. Gallun** 78

Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb. New. Untested. Whither goest man at the terrible hour of the detonation?

▸ *Planet's Star Feature*

THE VIZIGRAPH **2 & 108**

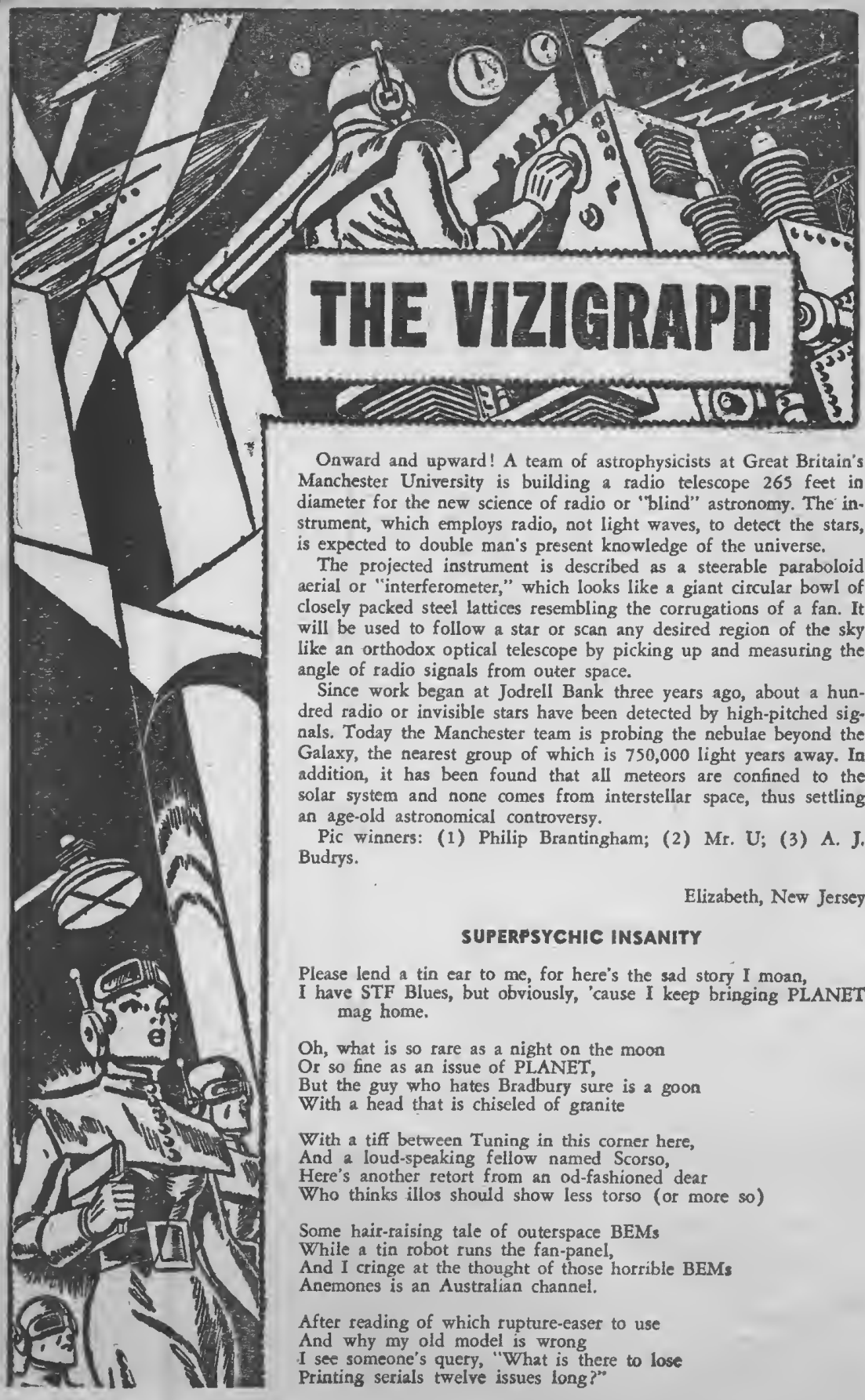
Heaven and Hell, side by side.

T. T. SCOTT, *President* JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor* MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 114 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1952, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 8, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 25¢ per copy. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 114 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

173

PRINTED IN U. S. A.



THE VIZIGRAPH

Onward and upward! A team of astrophysicists at Great Britain's Manchester University is building a radio telescope 265 feet in diameter for the new science of radio or "blind" astronomy. The instrument, which employs radio, not light waves, to detect the stars, is expected to double man's present knowledge of the universe.

The projected instrument is described as a steerable paraboloid aerial or "interferometer," which looks like a giant circular bowl of closely packed steel lattices resembling the corrugations of a fan. It will be used to follow a star or scan any desired region of the sky like an orthodox optical telescope by picking up and measuring the angle of radio signals from outer space.

Since work began at Jodrell Bank three years ago, about a hundred radio or invisible stars have been detected by high-pitched signals. Today the Manchester team is probing the nebulae beyond the Galaxy, the nearest group of which is 750,000 light years away. In addition, it has been found that all meteors are confined to the solar system and none comes from interstellar space, thus settling an age-old astronomical controversy.

Pic winners: (1) Philip Brantingham; (2) Mr. U; (3) A. J. Budrys.

Elizabeth, New Jersey

SUPERPSYCHIC INSANITY

Please lend a tin ear to me, for here's the sad story I moan,
I have STF Blues, but obviously, 'cause I keep bringing PLANET mag home.

Oh, what is so rare as a night on the moon
Or so fine as an issue of PLANET,
But the guy who hates Bradbury sure is a goon
With a head that is chiseled of granite

With a tiff between Tuning in this corner here,
And a loud-speaking fellow named Scorso,
Here's another retort from an od-fashioned dear
Who thinks illos should show less torso (or more so)

Some hair-raising tale of outerspace BEMs
While a tin robot runs the fan-panel,
And I cringe at the thought of those horrible BEMs
Anemones is an Australian channel.

After reading of which rupture-easer to use
And why my old model is wrong
I see someone's query, "What is there to lose
Printing serials twelve issues long?"

So a toast to the tentacled monsters of space,
For the mutants and BEMs raise a cheer.
I like to read of them almost any place,
But I sure hope they never come here.

The oldsters and youngsters are having a spat
To add to the editor's cares.
But to sum it all up. PLANET'S worth it at that
Even though I have daily nightmares.

FRAN WORTH

"A" IS FOR AUTHOR

Box 666
Camrose, Alberta

Dear Ed,

This laboriously composed parchment is mainly a tribute to a certain author, who I think, is not quite as revered by fandom as he should be. (For purposes of suspense, I'll withhold his name until the end. Let's just call him "A".)

Now "A" is an author whose works aren't perhaps quite as good as some of STF's better known writers, but in essence his stories are intelligently written, well thought out, and good description is plentiful. His style is singular and pleasing to the fan who prefers space-opera or just plain fantasy. In some of his stories there can be detected the quality of a poet, a philosopher, or the delightful whimsy of a small boy.

In one tale especially, the plot, characterization and descriptions clearly indicate that the author possesses the sort of mind that understands and sympathizes with the feelings, hopes and tragedies of others. His Martians and outer-world creatures aren't merely pipe dreams, they're real. Their fanciful adventures are remarkably similar to anyone's experiences right here on Earth. They think and act almost like humans, and undoubtedly have the same emotions as their universal brothers. A person finds himself actually sympathizing with the little BEMs of our author's imagination, so homey and natural do they appear.

True, author "A" is no Ray Bradbury, but there are very few other authors who are. "A's" yarns satisfy me just as much, if not more so, than even an H. G. Wells novel.

From what I know of this young man, he is quite interested in the sciences (and will fight a duel with anyone who speaks ill of his love); enjoys travel very much, and has visited Europe, much of the U. S. and parts of Canada. Other interests are philosophy; history; the arts; (especially Rembrandt and the Greek sculptors); music (Bach and Mozart); literature; people and cuisine. He attended the University of Minnesota in '48, and has done some graduate work since then.

How about giving this lad a friendly hand-shake instead of the cold-shoulder? You must admit, a clasp of the hand makes a man feel more at home than a cold, stony stare.

I'm casting my ballot for Poul Anderson. How about you?

Cordially,
MAVIS HARTMAN, Female

FLABBERGASTED

442 East 'E' Street
Elizabethton, Tenn.

Dear Editor,

This is my second letter to you. My first, which you printed a few months back, told you how good you were. To be truly consistent, this one should tell you how bad you are.

I buy PLANET, read it, study it, and try to find fault with it (so help me, I do), but there just isn't anything at which to snipe.

A lot of fans condemn PLANET as having "too much space opera." So what? Just so long as it is PLANET space opera. It just bears out that which I have always contended: that space opera can be good, if it is written right. Why is it that ol' PLANET'S stuff is so far above its competitors? Why, indeed! The credit is *yours*, dear editor, and no one else. After all, a writer will only write and sell stories that are up to a particular editor's standards.

I've tried, real hard, to find fault with the way you run PLANET. Why can't you make a slip once in a while like other editors?

STORIES: A-1!

Covers and inside illos: I like them. I LIKE them!

Vizigraph: Tops!

Other: Who the devil cares about the rest!

I am getting plenty tired of the way some of the fans are sniping at Bradbury. Why the *&!;?-xœ(* can't they leave him alone? The lad is doing masterful work.

As for Edwin Corley in May's VIZIGRAPH; I wish he were informed that there are plenty of old-time STF fans still sitting on the sidelines. Maybe the new fen *are* dominating fandom; but he'll hear from the old "moss-backs" when things get too far out of hand. We who have been reading STF for twenty years or more don't say very much; but we still read and take an interest in what is going on. What's wrong with doctors, et al reading STF? We like it too.

Sincerely yours,
DR. L. W. CARPENTER

ATTENTION!

20 Stanley Street
Irvington, N. J.

Dear Editor:

Something has come up that must be said to your general science fiction public and in particular, Mavis Hartman, since her letter in the May issue touched on the subject I am about to relate. The reason I didn't write to her personally is that I thought the rest of the fen would be interested too.

The Newark *Evening News* recently published a sizable article entitled MICE SURVIVE SPACE TRIP. It goes on to state that an air force scientist (unnamed) told of a rocket catapulted 80 miles into space with live monkeys and mice aboard. I'll quote the rest of the article and the fen can get what they wish out of it.

"It was a preliminary test aimed at learning eventually whether man can fly in outerspace, or in the border zone of space ranging up to altitudes of 120 miles above the earth. The mice are still living and propagating freely. The five monkeys survived the trip up, but four of them were killed when parachutes carrying them back to earth failed. The fifth monkey landed but died of heat prostration in the New Mexico desert.

"The account which outdoes a lot of science fiction, was presented at a meeting of the Aero Medical Association by Dr. J. P. Henry of the Air Force's aero medical laboratory at Wright-Patterson Base, Dayton, Ohio. The tests were designed to determine the physical and psychological effects of being made "weightless" under certain conditions of extreme altitude flight—a possible hazard that would face man in the regions of free space. This gravity free condition can be produced for several minutes as a

(*Continued on page* 108)

Thane knew this crazy duel was just another of Candor's roadblocks. He had to win.



EVIL OUT OF ONZAR

By MARK GANES

The orphan system of Onzar was fuming under its leader's driving, paranoid megalomania. For there was a prize. A vast, grand prize within a parsec of this ambitious domain—the major warp-lines of space crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Worlds and the Darzent Empire. Skyward, hungry legions!

ROGER THANE had, of course, heard of these meetings. The stories of his acquaintances in Liaison had been graphic enough but they didn't begin to do the scene justice. It was, well, jarring.

Through the one-way glass panel built into one side of the vast meeting hall of the space station, Thane looked directly across at the delegation from Onzar, though "delegation" was hardly the word. All top gold from the Onzar group was there, and it was easy to tell their rank—fleet marshals, the technical advisors, the interpreters—by the amount of gold that encrusted their helmets,



coruscated from their shoulder boards, and crept and crawled in heavy filigree around their uniforms. In that assembly it was easy to pick out Candar. Shorter than the average Onzarian, with shaven head, his uniform was quite plain except for small, double-headed platinum shagells on the collar.

And Candar was doing all the talking. When he had started one hour and fifteen minutes ago his voice had been harsh and low. Now it had increased in pitch and volume and he was striding back and forth, showing his scorn for the Allied Systems in every gesture. Thane glanced at the "absolute" dial of his watch and wondered how long it would keep up.

". . . we have come to deal with you in good faith and again you seek to exploit us. You would, if you could, take all we produce and give nothing in return. This you shall not do. Onzar is young, but already its power encompasses five suns. Each day we grow stronger. We do not need your shoddy goods in exchange for our treasure."

As Candar's voice became louder and more shrill Thane noticed that a technician to his left kept adjusting the recorder dials. In an hour or so the speech would be broadcast through Onzar, three and a half light years from this meeting place in space. Candar was choosing words to inflame the already fanatical nationalism of his expanding system. "You would take our discoveries, the fruits of our genius and industry. You would even take our young men into slavery. But this Candar will prevent. We are a warrior race, and what we need, we take. Our day approaches."

The last three words were his trademark, his invariable sign-off. So that was that. Candar strode from the room followed by the marshals, the advisors, the interpreters. Thane looked over to Garth who had slumped a bit in his conference chair on the Allied Systems side of the room, and was lighting a cigar. Thane had never particularly liked Garth, but, now, he felt a touch of sympathy with him. Garth took two long puffs on his cigar and then slowly shrugged his shoulders as if to put a final period to the scene.

Back in the Allied Systems naval cruiser, Garth was getting out of his reserve marshal's uniform. He glanced across at Thane, strapping his couch belts at the other side of the compartment. "I wanted you to see Candar in operation. Figured you might as well as long as this show was scheduled anyway. Could be that it will be of use to you in your new assignment."

The navigator's voice came over the intercom, "Prepare for finite acceleration, twenty seconds absolute."

GARTH zipped up his civilian coveralls and dropped to the couch, slipping the stub of his cigar into the converter tube. "This conference was about like the rest. It makes the sixth, now, that I've sat through with Candar. You remember he was full of cooperation right at the start while we were renewing the gold-trade agreement. After that was settled there was nothing more in it for him except the chance to make another speech."

Thane looked over at Garth. "I noticed that. But why? There was certainly plenty of gold splashed over everyone in the Onzar delegation, but what is it that makes the stuff so important to them?"

Garth looked over in surprise. "You don't know? Well, of course you wouldn't. You've been working on specialized stuff on the other side of the Galaxy. I'll give you some of the background on the way back to Liaison. The sleep-trainer will fill in there."

Garth stopped. Everything stopped as the acceleration began. Both of them were overbraced for the acceleration was light and even. It was only 5000 KM to the nearest warp-line.

As acceleration slacked off for the five-minute coast into the warp, Garth lit another cigar and began. "Onzar was one of those relatively distant systems which were colonized back in the days when all they had was the finite drive. Of course, it took them a generation or so to get out there, at just under the speed of light. And when they got there, the best guess is that their ship was too damaged for further flight. Otherwise, considering the planet, they wouldn't have stayed."

Thane flipped through a systems manual to the geographical data for Onzar IV. He readily agreed that they wouldn't have stayed if it had been possible for them to get away. Onzar IV was cold, bitterly cold. Hurricane winds were common. The mountains went up to forty and fifty kilometers,

and the land between them was largely barren desert.

"They couldn't get back into space," Garth continued, "so they stayed in splendid isolation for about 1500 years. Not another ship touched the system till the warp-lines were discovered."

Thane looked up. "I suppose they went through the usual reversion of the orphan systems?"

Garth grunted. "A lot worse than usual. Of course, our version of their history is largely guesswork because the Onzarians have never allowed any research. But it's clear that the immigration crew, or their first-generation descendants, put on a very effective little war between themselves. By the time they were finished Onzar IV was back in the age of ox-carts, without the ox."

The intercom sounded again. "Five seconds to warp-line." There was a pause, then the familiar shummer and they were on the warp-line drive. As usual, the shummer had put out Garth's cigar. He re-lit it and went on. "When we began using warp-line travel we hit Onzar in the first fifty years of exploration. Practically had to. It's only a parsec from the confluence of nine lines running between our part of the Galaxy and the Darzent Empire. Right on the main road, right in the middle of the next war." He stared in silence at Thane for a moment. "That's one reason I've called you in on this."

For most of the rest of the trip to Liaison, Garth continued to explain the strange orphan system of Onzar. In the religion, as Garth described it, the whole priesthood was female, and gold had magical value. All the men wore gold, the amount strictly in line with their rank. They despised the women but were in superstitious dread of them because only the church could sanctify and give power to their gold symbols of rank. At first, the men had lived in warring tribes, the women in religious groups. They came together each spring and fall for the ceremonies of gold consecration.

Still, they did make considerable technical progress, partially because of their interest in mining. By the time the first warp-line ship reached them, the Onzarians had the internal combustion engine, nation-states, mass production, planet-wide wars.

"Of course," Garth went on, "in the early days of warp-line exploration we weren't as careful as we are now. The Onzarians picked up enough to put on a real atomic war within fifty years. After that they expanded through their own system, and even took over nearby suns. They certainly had the motive for conquest, too. Gold was running out on their own planet, and they'd go to any lengths to get it."

Thane glanced at his watch and got back onto his couch. "About time for deceleration," he said. Garth also began fastening his straps. Thane glanced over, with curiosity. "Sounds like the usual story, with some interesting variations. Where do I come in?"

"The thing that makes Onzar uniquely important," Garth said, "is its position. Space fleets from Darzent or from the A.S. will have to pass within a parsec of Onzar, because of the confluence of warp-lines in that part of the system. Whoever controls Onzar can win the war for the Galaxy when it comes."

Garth paused as they went through the shummer and the beginnings of deceleration, and then went on. "We were doing fairly well till Candar's revolt and seizure of power. He is leaning toward Darzent. Apparently he thinks he can keep his own independence even if Darzent wins the decision. He's going along with us just enough to assure his supply of gold. But you noticed his own lack of gold ornamentation. His eventual aim is undoubtedly to dominate and destroy the religion because it's about the only independent force left on Onzar, and Candar is not going to tolerate any independent forces."

Garth looked steadily at Thane. "The rest of the details, the language, and your own mission will be made clear to you in the sleep trainer. And it is no exaggeration to say that you will be responsible for the future of the Galaxy."

LIAISON Headquarters had started out several centuries before as a small organization within the Department of the Oustide, directly under the control of the newly-formed Allied Systems Council. It had begun in a room, and had later moved to its own building. Now it occupied a planet.

The four planets in the system all ap-

peared to be barren, lifeless rocks. Appearances were correct for I, III, and IV. II, however, was not what it seemed. Like the others, the surface was rocky, barren, utterly lifeless, without atmosphere. But a few kilometers down, a red-haired boy had just won a game of bok at school recess. A research worker had just finished a report on an improved interrogatory drug. An administrative assistant had just planned a palace revolution on a system 200 light years away. And Roger Thane, Liaison Agent, was just entering Medico-Synthesis, some eighteen kilometers under the surface.

The young medic looked up as Thane stepped off the mobiltrack and entered the room. "You're Thane," he said, with curiosity in his voice. "The instructions and the sleep-record just came through the Pneum. I've heard about you people from Proxima. Just how does it work, anyway?"

Thane walked over to the sleep-table and grinned a little wearily. "How are you able to see?" he asked. "I don't know that I could tell a blind man satisfactorily. How do the people of the Noxus system telepath? I don't know, and they've tried to tell me. All I know is that mutations occurred sometime while Proxima Centauri was an orphan system, which enable many of us to make small changes in our appearance. Hair color, skin pigmentation, fingerprints. Usually takes about two days. Liaison Research learned how to speed it up with equipment but they never have learned just what they're working with." He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid that doesn't help you a bit but there's nothing much more I can say that will give you a clearer picture. I've tried before."

Thane was then in his own normal: black hair and eyes, somewhat over two meters in height, with the heavily tanned Proxima skin. Before sliding on the table he took a sheet from the medic and glanced over his new specifications: yellow eyes, golden hair, golden skin. Slight slant to eyes. Three centimeters height reduction. All routine changes, and a matter of a few minutes, with the aid of the Liaison equipment.

The medic was busy making connections, giving injections and setting dials. Thane looked up at the brightly lighted ceiling. With no perceptible lapse he was still staring at it when the medic began taking off the connections. But in the zero subjective time, the twelve minutes of elapsed time, Thane had changed his appearance completely. And what he had learned puzzled him at first and then angered him.

"Roger Thane," the sleep-record began, "your assignmnt is the protection of Dr. Manning Reine . . ."

Reine, he learned, was one of the scientists who had been working in obscure laboratories on the Forsberg Project. Forsberg's mathematics had shown the theoretical possibility of a discreet jump, with no time lapse, from one of the curving lines of warp to the next, instead of the present method of travel at "friction speed" along the erratically curving lines.

Garth's voice cut in on the speech record. "Now that we have the drive, what are we going to do with it? Politically, the Allied Systems cannot initiate the attack. Yet if we merely wait, Darzent will eventually learn the details of the drive. As it is, they outnumber us, two to one. They have the advantage in almost every respect. Their only deterrent has been the fear that we do have the second-stage drive.

"There have already been leaks—enough so that if Manning Reine falls into Darzent hands, they would have the drive in operation within a few days. Then immediate attack, and defeat. Your job is to protect Reine, or to kill him if there is danger of his loss to Darzent."

Manning Reine, a native of Onzar, had been educated at the Systems University at Beirut, Earth. He'd returned to Onzar but had fled at the time of the Candar revolution. On Earth, he'd married and gone on with his research work. Now, after twenty-five years, he was the key figure in the development of the drive. Undoubtedly his knowledge was enough to allow Darzent to develop the drive if he should fall into their hands. And he was not susceptible to the protective, anti-interrogatory drugs. Reine himself had developed the vitally important gold catalyst principle.

REINE'S address was just a pair of top-secret geographical coordinates, a thousand kilometers from the nearest feeder jetline. Thane looked down at the endless Norwegian forest, a thousand meters below his rented anti-grav scout. He felt depressed.

That was always a reaction to be expected, of course, after an accelerated identity change. But then too, there'd been the scene with Garth after he'd left Medico-Synthesis.

Thane had strode past Garth's secretary and into the inner office without a word. Garth was behind his desk, his back to the door, studying a galactic wall map. He turned slowly.

"A bodyguard!" Thane exclaimed. "Is that your idea of the most responsible job in the Galaxy? You pulled me off the Elron business just when I was set to engineer the beginnings of a representative government there. The whole project will be set back by years. And it was touch-and-go as it was. And for what?"

Garth looked at him calmly for a moment, as he bit off the end of a fresh cigar. "Thane," he finally said, with deliberation, "the executive council of the Department of the Outside just doesn't like your methods. You've put through some really brilliant maneuvers but you've done it alone, taking chances. I've tried to go along with you but the last report from Elron caused a real blow-up at the council. One of the council members suggested your assignment to this bodyguard job, as you call it, and they all agreed. I had to go along."

"Just why, then, is all this Onzar background necessary? Did you think it would fool me?"

"I said I *had* to go along," Garth answered impatiently, "but that's not all. I also *wanted* to go along with the idea. This is much more important than it appears on the surface. We have reason to believe that Reine is still connected with Onzar. We don't have much to go on, but one of your jobs will be to get the details."

The coordinates on the lat-don dial had almost lined up, though the forest was still completely unbroken below. A few hundred meters to the right and he had it. Thane let the anti-grav hover for a moment, and then dropped silently downward. Branches of spruce brushed against the plastic cabin as the anti-grav settled into the forest. It gently settled on a thin layer of powder snow. There was nothing but the silence of the forest, broken only by the thin sound of the wind in the branches above.

He stepped out, breathing in the cold, crisp air. He started off through the forest using the unfamiliar Terran compass. One hundred twenty meters, azimuth 273 (difficult to maintain through the trees) and he would come, according to his directions, to a tree a little different from the rest. He continued, with the brittle snow tinkling faintly under his feet.

Then a new sound. Once . . . again . . . then a repeated volley. Stoltz guns. From the tone, hand size, tuned down below lethal potential, but enough to stun and mutilate.

He was absolutely still for a moment. Then he began running towards the sound, trying to minimize the noise of crunching snow under his feet.

He swerved to pass a clump of trees and brush. As he did three things happened. A small thrush started into the air off a branch, fluttered a moment, then fell to the snow. A white-clad figure appeared ahead, just at the next bend. And . . . Thane wondered just what he was doing here . . . why wasn't he on Proxima? He remembered school there . . what fun in elementary atomics. . . .

Then his training took over, forcing his temporarily twisted brain to perform rationally. As he dropped to the brittle snow and aimed his own Stoltz, he automatically catalogued his confusion as the result of an offshot, a near miss. He hit the snow. The white figure was just off his sights, but close enough. He pressed the impeller. That one didn't miss, and it had been set on "lethal." He crept forward across the ground. He was sure that his immediate opponent was through, but there were others. The slithering Stoltz noises ahead increased in volume.

He reached the white-cloaked figure. Onzarian. The eyes and mouth had the idiot expression peculiar to a Stoltz corpse. Thane considered. He was at a disadvantage against the snow in his blue civilian coveralls. He quickly stripped the white cloak off the corpse and put it on as he continued at a run.

He slowed as he approached a clearing. Not much of a clearing, not large enough to be spotted from the air. Two figures in the Patrol uniform were stretched out, motionless, a few meters from the tree at the center. Two men in white cloaks were carrying a third figure between them, just enter-

ing the pine forest at the further edge. Thane instantly recognized the unconscious figure as Reine. At once he started towards them, shifting the Stoltz to the lightest stun position. That cut the range way down, even for this close-in weapon, but it would be dangerous for Reine if he used more. Reine apparently had had one dose already. On the run, Thane aimed at one figure he had not seen before. Apparently it was good, for Thane was able to keep going. Fifteen meters distant from the three figures, Thane stopped. They were just visible through the trees. He raised his Stoltz and . . . thought of Proxima. . . .

. . . he was fifteen and the dance was wonderful. She was dressed in the new shell-white toga that was fashionable just then. It certainly set off her jet-black hair, shining on the terrace, in the light of Proxima's two moons. . . .

But it wasn't black, it was blonde. And she wasn't leaning against his arm on the terrace, she was standing in front of him, and he was lying on the brittle snow. There was a Stoltz in her bare right hand.

She stared at him, steadily and coldly. "It is turned all the way up now. I hope you are ready to die, Onzarian!"

THANE, as he recovered fully from the Stoltz shock, recognized the tall blonde girl standing before him. Astrid Reine, Manning's daughter and assistant. He raised himself painfully to his elbows. As he did, he saw Astrid's knuckles tighten around the impeller.

"No, Astrid," he said. "I'm here to help you. We may still be able to save your father."

Her hand didn't waver. The expression on her golden face was scornful. "Do not lie so childishly! You came with the Onzarians, the agents of Candar. You are one of them. You came to take my father."

Thane desperately gestured back the way he had come. "My footprints are in the snow. There's an Onzarian I killed. And my anti-grav. I was sent to protect your father."

"Who are you?"

A roaring noise came from the east and a moment later a jet cleared the tree tops, headed south. Thane saw the ship at the edge of his vision, but kept his eyes on Astrid. She turned her head slightly at the sound. Slightly, but enough. Thane's tensed muscles contracted as he sprang to his feet. She pressed the impeller—just as his left foot kicked in a high arc and caught the side of the barrel.

The gun spun off to the edge of the clearing. "Now," he said angrily, "don't you think we've wasted enough time? They have him now, and with that jet they'll have enough start on us to leave the system before we can catch them." As he spoke, the jet reappeared and slipped down low over the trees to the west. "Hurry," he said, "they'll be on us in seconds."

She looked at him, hesitated. Then, "All right. Inside."

She stepped over to the trunk of the tree and spoke softly. A panel opened in the ground at the foot of the tree, over a grav-well. They dropped gently, and the panel closed behind them. As they floated slowly downward they heard a sharp explosion overhead. He smiled wryly at Astrid, dropping beside him.

"Your change of heart," he said, "didn't come any too soon."

Reine's laboratory, like a great deal else in the Allied Systems, had gone underground as galactic war approached. Far beneath the surface, the grav-well ended in a corridor, stretching out a hundred meters. Rooms filled with equipment opened out at either side. As they walked down the corridor, Thane explained his mission and his Onzarian appearance. "Now," he went on, "there's a lot for me to catch up on."

"It's been terrible," Astrid said. "First, there was the attack yesterday. We fought them off, then. Liaison radioed that they were sending more protection. But the jet that landed today flashed the Laison code to our auto-interrogator. We lowered the screen and they began to attack. We didn't stand a chance, once they were inside."

It was all clear enough, and it was certainly also clear that he was late. There was the faint possibility that Reine could still be rescued before the Onzarians could leave the system.

He turned to Astrid. "If they plan to leave by the regular Onzarian transport, we should be able to catch them at the Aberdeen spaceport. Where's the radio?"

They had reached an open door. Astrid's

gesture was hopeless. Thane looked inside. The Onzarians had been there before they left. Twisted, melted circuits were all they had left.

THE anti-grav scout got them to the Aberdeen spaceport an hour late. The Onzarian gold transport had left for Kadell IV. A few questions were enough to justify Thane's growing pessimism. Several Onzarians had taken passage. One was heavily drugged, under the care of a physician.

The hours dragged till they were able to get passage on the next Kadell-bound transport the following day. Once spaceborne, Thane felt a lot of his depression lift. There was a good chance they would reach the Kadenar spaceport on Kadell IV before the other ship had left. In the meantime there was Astrid. . . .

By the time they had reached the second warp-line intersection Thane had learned that Astrid had also attended the Systems University at Beirut, three classes behind him. They'd had some of the same professors and a couple of mutual friends. Thane told her of life on Proxima, and she told him how she had lived and worked with her father. Her talk was in the off-hand sort of vocal shorthand that their generation shared. But through the facade, Thane could see that she was immensely brilliant in research, fascinated with her work, and at the same time, immensely lonely. She was animated when she spoke of the work that she and her father had done but there was a different sparkle in her yellow eyes when she talked of the university. Talks with fellow students, a brief love affair, weekend trips to Tel Aviv or New Rome—it was plain that she had badly missed it all in her years in Norway, in the glittering, isolated laboratory far under the snow.

And always there was recurrent alarm for her father. She broke off her talk of the University and gripped his arm. "Roger, we must stop them. If they take my father to Onzar, he'll be killed. And the movement. What will happen to that?"

"The movement?" Roger Thane asked, puzzled.

"Why of course," she said, surprised. "Don't you know about it?"

Thane was about to answer, but just then there was the shummer as they re-entered space at the second warp-line intersection. At the same moment the red warning light in their compartment blinked. The navigator's voice, with an undercurrent of alarm, came over the intercom. "Emergency. Emergency! Crew to battle stations. Passengers to lifeboats."

Roger and Astrid dashed out into the port corridor. The corridor widened as they ran forward, and they were suddenly in the port fire control center. An Onzarian officer, the Third from his insignia, was at the fire control panel. Thane looked at the screen over the Third's head. The ship was black and unmarked but if it was a pirate it was by far the biggest Thane had ever seen. The whole black hulk was turning in space, a hundred KM away, lining up its armament. It would only be seconds. Thane looked at the Third. He seemed to be confused, and was fumbling almost blindly with the instruments. He twisted dials almost at random, on the edge of panic. Thane hesitated—then realized what it must be—Stoltz artillery. The unmarked ship had managed to get through with it, during the microseconds of the shummer when the screens were down.

He could feel some of the effect himself. He went through a moment of indecision, but that was all. Then he stepped forward and shoved the Third Officer aside. The officer looked blank, then his face reddened in anger. As Thane tried to bring the armament to bear, the Third was clawing at his back. Thane bent and twisted. The Third went crashing into a bulkhead. Thane didn't even glance at him. There was no time. He turned back to the fire control. As he did, the first disruptor explosion came, not two kilometers ahead. The next one would get them.

Thane twisted the manual computer for there was no time to wait for the automatic to warm up. Two small adjustments and he touched the impeller. Instantly his disrupter burst appeared on the screen off the starboard bow of the black enemy. Not close enough to do real damage but enough to throw off the pirate's next shot. The shot came. Needles danced wildly on the board before Thane. The whole ship vibrated wildly. The power drain was tremendous, but the inner screens held. As Thane lined up the pirate again, the intercom said, "Five

seconds to warp-line!" They'd be safe, then, after the micro second when the screens were down. And the pirate was in position to take full advantage of that moment. Thane's fingers moved with scherzo speed as he fed twelve adjustments to the fire control. He let go with everything they had on the port side, and switched off the guns, in preparation for the shummer. It came almost simultaneously, and the pirate disappeared as they went into the hyper-space of the warp-line. There was no time to see if any damage had been done. His last shots must have had effect, though, or they would never have made it back into the warp.

Thane turned away wearily from the fire-control panel. The whole encounter had lasted less than twenty seconds, but the strain of fighting against the Stoltz effect and of manually computing twelve variables had been wearing. He saw that the Third Officer was now standing close to Astrid. He started to say he was sorry that he had to act as he did. But the Third walked over to him, with military precision, his face set. He stood before Thane, young, military, and serious.

"You have impugned my honor and that of Onzar. For that your life is forfeit. We fight on Kadenar."

"I also saved your life and my own," Thane said drily, "but if you want me to take yours back, I'll be glad to oblige. See you at Kadenar." Thane turned on his heel and walked away.

DUELLING was forbidden by the Systems Code but on such outposts as Kadenar it was not only allowed but even encouraged.

Therefore, no time was lost in customs. Thane's forged Onzarian passport was stamped "duellist priority" and that was that. Astrid came through as readily as his second. And the Third, with another junior officer, was just behind them.

The four of them sat side by side without a word as their automatic anti-grav taxi took them the ten kilos from the port to Kadenar City, and then beyond. The taxi continued over the City and its three "towns"—the spacetown, the bureaucrat's town, and the miner's town—and finally settled gently down in the foothills beyond. There was a clearing beneath them, with a fenced-in surface. A medic looked up as they got out.

"Differences to settle, gentlemen and my lady? Interne Pyuf at your service. The duelling tax is three sals. Always glad to accept any Systems currency. Then too, there's the cremation deposit required from both parties, the medication fee, and if you gentlemen are interested in insurance, I'm able to supply some very special policies."

After the principals and seconds had signed the register and all fees had been paid, Pyuf leaned back in his chair, lit one of the fashionable 30 centimeter cigarettes, and explained the rules. "In general, no criminal nor civil disability attaches to actions of the principals within this enclosure. Certain fines, however, are imposed if the rules are not followed. To wit: knives only can be used, not to exceed twelve inches. Each contestant may wear a personnel anti-grav, limited to fifteen feet ascentability. Anti-gravs must be adjusted to compensate for native gravities." He smiled, in self-deprecation. "That's Pyuf the lawyer at work. Now perhaps you prefer Pyuf the bartender." He reached under his counter and pulled out a bottle, labelled in the local language, and poured out five glasses. "To your continued good health, gentlemen, and I sincerely hope I can return your cremation deposits—though of course, many previous contestants, grateful to be alive, have contributed the amounts to the Interne's Benefit Association."

Thane and the others picked up their glasses. The stuff was yellow, sticky, sweet, and without the slightest doubt, alcoholic. When Thane could manage to speak, he said, "By all means, Pyuf. I'm sure that both my opponent and I will contribute to the internes, dead or alive. Shall we proceed with the main event?"

Before answering, Pyuf poured a small chaser from the same bottle and stood up, a little unsteadily. "By all means. But before we start I might mention that I have been ordained in fourteen systems' religions and will be glad to perform last rites. . . ."

"Enough, enough," said the Third, who was beginning to show signs of nervousness. "Let us get on with it."

Pyuf stepped over to the weapons racks and removed a set of knives and a pair of

anti-grav jackets. He laid them on his table and gestured to the Third. "Take a knife and jacket." The Third chose the knife and jacket to the left without more than a cursory glance.

Pyuf reached in his jacket pocket and brought out one of the twelve-faced dies of Kadenar. "Pyuf, the gambler," he said. "You two gentlemen will now roll the die. He who is high has his choice of either group of weapons."

The Third Officer rolled first, and the Kadenar equivalent of nine came up. Thane rolled a five.

"Now," said Pyuf, "it's Pyuf, the couturier. Step forward, gentlemen, to be fitted."

Pyuf fitted the anti-grav jackets to Thane and the Third, and gave each a brief, efficient test. He stepped back and leaned against his counter. "And now, Pyuf, the referee." He pointed to a green line bisecting the enclosure. You gentlemen will remain on the other side of the line during the contest. You remain within the fences. You do not ascend higher than fifteen feet. The contest lasts till blood has been drawn three times or until a prior fatality—or do I need add that? At any rate, that's all the rules. The State wishes you well, while it frowns on your activity. To your circles, gentlemen, and await my signal."

Thane judged the area marked off for the "contest" to be about ten meters square. It was smoothly surfaced with one of the hard local metals, and Thane noticed a few bloodstains near the edges. Most of them were the dark brown of dried human blood, but there were other alien colors mixed in here and there.

As he walked across the court Thane looked carefully at his opponent, appraising him. They were both about the same height but the Third had several centimeters more reach. Probably around the equivalent of 23 years, absolute time. Certainly at the peak of physical condition. Thane decided on his course. He would try first for his opponent's anti-grav. Probably the other would try to cover his throat and belly, and Thane might be able to get to the anti-grav by surprise. Then, draw the blood that was in the rules, and get the thing over. Not much of a plan, but at least a plan.

There was an inset ring of some cupra-alloy at each end of the duelling court, about a meter in diameter. Thane reached his end, watched his opponent, and waited for Pyuf's signal. Pyuf slowly poured another drink. As he raised it with his right hand, his left arm went up over his head. He swallowed the drink, and the left arm came down.

The Third Officer came on in all-out attack. His anti-grav assisted leap was long and shallow, aimed at Thane's throat. At the same moment Thane bent his knees slightly and dropped. Just before he hit the surface he pushed up and outward with all his strength and twisted his body sharply. With the assistance of the anti-grav he was floating now directly above and behind his opponent. He cut off the anti-grav completely and dropped, with all the planet's gravity. As he did, the Third twisted and raised his knife. He lacked a fraction of a second to complete the turn and get into lethal position. Thane hit him on the shoulder and instantly turned his anti-grav to the "full" position, grabbed his opponent's shoulders, and pushed against the court surface with both heels.

They both went up and over, almost to the fifteen meter limit. As they did, Thane worked his knife into the anti-grav pak on his opponent's back. Three connections, at the top, left, and bottom. His knife cut in and out rapidly, three times. Then he suddenly pushed away, slipped his own anti-grav to zero, and dropped to the surface.

The Third, suddenly without the assistance of his anti-grav, crashed into the fence and dropped leadenly to the metalled surface. Thane crouched a moment watching him. Thane had a cut above one eye, and the blood was beginning to run. He stepped forward. . . .

. . . the knife in his hand . . . what was it there for? He should be on his way to the rotor meet with the rest of the boys . . . he was going to win this year . . . he was going to win. . . .

III

THE first feeling Thane had when he came out of the Stoltz shock was lightness. He raised his right arm as he came back to consciousness, and he noticed that the effort required was less than he had ex-

pected. He opened his eyes, and they gradually came back into focus. He was lying on a cot in a dimly lit room. The light, he saw, came from a small window across the room. With an unfamiliarly light tread, Thane stepped over to the window. The pane was double, transparent metal. It took only one glance at the bleak, wintry landscape outside to explain the feeling of lightness. It could only be the landscape of Onzar II, whose gravity was about 80% that of Kadell IV.

Someone obviously had reason to cart him, unconscious, across a few light years. Apparently, the duel had not been what it seemed. But how? And why? Quite possibly the Third Officer was an agent of Onzarian counter-espionage. If so, what had happened to Astrid? How had Pyuf and the others been taken care of? On the other hand, it was quite possible that Astrid was behind it. He remembered how she seemed to have been talking to the Third just before the challenge. But for what motive? Thane smiled to himself. The speculation was interesting, but a little barren till more data turned up.

It was not long in coming. Thane had begun to explore the room carefully when a door opened. It was Pyuf, armed. "You'll come with me, please." No longer the half drunk duelling attendant, Pyuf was now quite sober and quite serious.

Thane went. There were questions to be answered.

He had somehow expected a long corridor with many doors. Instead, he walked directly into a brightly lighted room, filled with a great deal of equipment. He recognized the latest model lie-detector, a rather outdated narco-synthesizer, a Class B Psychocomputer. Much of the rest was unfamiliar.

There were two Onzarians in the room. Both, in contrast to Pyuf, who was dark and shorter than the average, had typical Onzar features—yellow eyes with a slight slant, and golden skin. Pyuf gestured towards Thane. "Give him the whole routine. We want to know everything you can get. Then let us know."

Thane, of course, had been prepared for this sort of thing. He'd spent time in Medico-Synthesis after every major job to immunize him against interrogation. He'd had three separate, integrated pasts built up, all quite fictional, which could be used during interrogation. He was protected, at a certain level, against physical torture, and he did have a certain protection against most of the drugs.

But the older medic simply asked him to sit down. He did, and his assistant twisted a few dials. Indicators gave readings, quite a few hundred readings. A metal recorder plate dropped out. The assistant dropped this into the computer which began busily to eject tape. The older man read the tape as it ticked out. The computer stopped and he crumpled up the tape and tossed it into a corner. "Injection A17," he said.

Vaguely he heard his name. He sat up, blinked his eyes open and looked around. He was in quite a different room. There were curtains at the windows, a desk, a rug, even a fire. There was a figure in front of him speaking to him. "Roger Thane, we know you now. There is much that we do not know, that has been hidden from even our methods. But we know enough."

Thane was now fully alert. The voice had been soothing, but the shock on seeing the face, when his eyes had come back into focus, was enough to change all his ideas. It was Manning Reine.

Reine was sitting close to him, one elbow casually thrown across the desk. He smiled, and asked if Thane would like coffee or a drink.

"I've had both," Thane said, "and they're not what I need now. Right now all I want is what goes on. My job, which I didn't particularly want, was to nursemaid you. Frankly, it's turned out to be quite a job. After three or four very thorough stoltzings, one space battle, a challenge, and a duel, you have me kidnapped. All right. I've got a reasonably open mind. I'll listen. Now just what in the hell is going on?"

Manning Reine said calmly, "Undoubtedly you have reason for anger, Thane. It is true that we have used you. We have had to. But you should know that there was nothing faked about my abduction. Those who took me were Onzarians, agents of Candar, and they were deadly serious. It was only with the greatest of good fortune that I was able to escape. Only the presence of Pyuf at Aberdeen Spaceport made it possible.

"And another point for your consideration. We did not know your position. Your appearance is Onzarian. We could not be sure that you were what you claimed, an agent of Liaison. And even if we could have been sure, there were considerations that required us to proceed with the greatest caution. Now, I hope you will accept my apologies and listen. There is much that you can do, important for us and for the whole Galaxy."

Thane controlled his anger and nodded assent. At the moment it was his job to listen if he was going to be useful from here on in.

"You already have some knowledge of the second-stage drive," Reine began. "You already know that it frees man for flight through the Galaxy at an average speed ten times greater than that now possible with the present warp-line drive. You are aware of the warp-line type of movement. We cannot leave the warps without reverting to finite drive. As you know, the warps are electro-gravitic lines of force in space, along which interstellar travel has proved possible with certain devices. . . ."

"As you say," Thane broke in, "I know all that. I know too that the second-stage drive allows practically instantaneous travel across the warps. But just what does that have to do with your disappearance, and the attacks that have been made on me?"

"Just this. I am, you know, one of the researchers responsible for the development of the second-stage drive. I am more than that. I am also the present leader of the Onzarian underground."

MANNING REINE relaxed in his chair and sipped his coffee. "At the same time I want you to understand that I am completely, wholeheartedly loyal to the Allied Systems. As you know, I was educated at Earth University at a time when that was possible for an Onzarian. I left Onzar for good at the beginning of the Candar revolution, expecting to devote the rest of my life to research within the A.S. But now I am convinced that Candar must be overthrown if our own systems are to survive."

"It's a proposition that will take some explaining," Thane said coldly.

"The basic ideas are simple enough," Reine said, "once you see how they fit together. There is, of course, nothing new about the basic theory of the second-stage drive. Even at the beginning of the ancient atomic era, scientists were groping for the Unified Field. The basic unified field equations were the first step. Then came the charting of the electro-gravitic lines of stress in space, which we know familiarly as warp-lines. That was the foundation for faster-than-light travel, and all that went with it. But of course it was awkward. We could not leave the warp-lines unless we returned to finite speed. We could change direction only at the intersection of warps. Many star-systems were far off the warp-lines, and could be reached only after days or weeks of travel at finite speeds."

"All very true," said Thane, "but it still doesn't explain a thing to me. About your place in this or Candar's."

Reine hardly noticed the interruption. He went on, professorially. "The solution has always seemed clear. In order to travel at will through space, at faster-than-light speeds all we needed to do was to create our own Field with its own warp-line. If a ship could generate its own electro-gravitic warp it would be able to travel in almost unlimited directions with no time lapse except for pauses at each warp-line crossed. The power factors were such that an entirely new principle of operation was needed. We have found it in the so-called gold catalyst principle, and we now have a practical, economical second-stage drive."

Thane frowned. "But that would seem to make Onzar less important. Why do we need to worry about them now?"

Reine was about to answer but the door opened and Pyuf was there. "How goes it, duellist?"

"It was a great fight," Thane said, "until you decided to tear up the rules. You forgot to tell me that you included 'kidnapper' in your list of trades."

Reine smiled. "That's just one of many that Pyuf forgot to mention. Forger, propagandist, and political theorist might also have been added." He turned to Pyuf. "I've about covered the technology. Why don't you give our friend the politics?"

"Sure." Pyuf sat on the desk swinging his short legs. "First, though, I'm sorry about the duel, Thane. We had to do it."

"Reine's already assured me of that once

or twice," Thane said drily. "I would like to know, though, just how you did it."

"That's simple enough. For months now we've been using the duelling court on Kadenar as an exchange point in the underground. It's been very helpful because of the ease that duellists have in getting through customs. In your case we were lucky. Or I should say that Astrid was quick and intelligent enough to take advantage of a fortunate situation. A few words from her were enough to instigate the Onzarian officer to challenge you. Remember that Onzarians have a tradition of duelling, and you had insulted him. Furthermore, he was still confused from the stoltz artillery."

"Clear enough. But may I ask why you bothered to let the duel go on at all? Why not just take me when we got to the court?"

"We wanted to explain your disappearance. At the same time that you were unconscious, your opponent and the other junior officer were also out. With a touch of post-hypnotic suggestion, they were both quite convinced that the Third Officer had won the duel and that you were dead. We had no trouble getting your 'corpse' back through customs and to Onzar."

"Probably," Thane said, "you had a purpose for all this. Before we go any further, let's have it."

"If you were an agent of Candar we would have eliminated you," Pyuf said. "You had already learned too much, and you had shown that you were a dangerous man. If you were a Liaison agent, it was still necessary for you to 'die.' At the moment, it's imperative that no word of our activity gets to the Allied Systems. And, if we can convince you, we badly need your help."

"It'll take some convincing from what's happened up to now. But go ahead."

"Ever wonder," Pyuf went on, "why the Darzent Empire hasn't attacked? What are they waiting for? They're aggressive. They have the edge in power, with two inhabited systems to one in the A.S. Their technology matches ours and their heavily centralized dictatorship allows them to move faster, at least at the beginning of a war."

"Well?"

"Two reasons. One, they never could be sure that we didn't have the second-stage drive. Two, they couldn't be sure of the allegiance of Onzar."

"Onzar—the whole five systems—is probably more of an armed camp than any other political entity in the Galaxy. But that isn't the real reason for their overwhelming importance." Pyuf jumped down off the desk and flipped a switch on the far wall. The galactic map appeared, with the warp-lines superimposed in red.

Pyuf pointed with his cigarette. "Take a look at those warps. All nine of the principal ones, crossing the Galaxy between the Allied Systems and the Darzent Empire, pass within a parsec of Onzar. A faster-than-light fleet going either way *has* to surface at the Onzar Confluence. And Candar, no matter how he sounds to you or me, is no fool. He, you can bet, has taken some long quiet looks at a map like this and he knows his position. So does Darzent. So do the people who are presumably running things in the Allied Systems."

Thane stood up. He had been off at the perimeter of the struggle, working in obscure but possibly important systems for the past three years. He hadn't been in a position to see all the factors in the struggle that was shaping up. But now at a glance he saw that Pyuf was probably right. "It makes sense," he admitted, "but what about the second-stage drive? Isn't that supposed to cut across warp-lines? Wouldn't that reduce to zero the strategic importance of our friend, Candar?"

At this, Manning Reine broke in excitedly, "But that's just the point, Thane! Remember I mentioned there were certain limits to the second-stage drive. We can, to a large extent, manufacture our own lines. But they are never wholly independent of the existing natural lines through space. Our dependence on the galactic lines varies from almost zero to almost unitary, depending on our position in space. The Onzarian Confluence has much the same effect as a whirlpool. Theoretically, we could force our way out of the whirlpool and go through the center of the Galaxy by a different route. But the energy required approaches infinity."

Thane stepped over to the map. He pointed to the Onzarian Confluence. "O.K. There's our bottleneck. But where's the cork? Just how do you figure on stopping a fleet if it does surface at the Onzarian Con-

fluence for two or three microseconds?"

Pyuf slapped the butt of his cigarette across the tray on Reine's desk. "There, Agent Thane, we reach the point of the whole show. But let's get the story straight from the source." His eyes went to Reine.

Reine, pouring his second cup of coffee, looked up. "If you mean me, that's not very accurate. It's true that it was developed in my laboratory but Astrid was the one who saw the hint, originally, and did all the development. I'm not even familiar with all the details." He smiled apologetically to Thane. "We're talking about the Tracer. As a by-product of our main job we discovered a new way of plotting warp-lines. Instead of doing by mathematics we found a way of plotting warps directly by instrument. Well, I was on the main line of research, and I had three times as much as I could do already. I just regarded this as a curiosity. But Astrid took it and built the Tracer."

Pyuf interrupted. He was not the man, Thane saw, who could abide technical explanations when they had a clear political implication. "The Tracer," he said, "is the cork for your bottleneck. With the tracer, we know when any ship is operating on second stage drive. With two tracers, separated on a baseline of a few million kilometers, we can plot position closely. Three tracers will pin-point them, and for a trip across the center of the Galaxy, we will know when and where they'll have to surface."

"That fits all right," Thane said, "but why tie in Onzar? Why not let the Allied Systems have the tracer?"

Pyuf shrugged impatiently. "Gentlemen, from here on, we need a drink. The explanation is simple, limpid, computable logic. As far as we can see, it's the only course." He stared pointedly at Thane. "But it also could be construed as treason. So we'd better have a drink." He stepped to the door. "Astrid, will you bring glasses and the bottle? We've got a bit of dialectics to dispense with."

AFTER Astrid had handed the drinks around, Pyuf downed his. Then he went on. "First of all, Thane, don't get me wrong. Maybe I couldn't pass a security check with some of the boys in the Department of the Outside. Maybe I could, I don't know. I've never tried. But I like the Allied Systems as well as anything the Galaxy has to offer and I want to live there. But let's take a hard look at them." He stopped to pour another glass. "Within the A.S. you have the main federation, and you have a lot of loosely confederated systems. Space only knows what the confederations will do. We can only hope. But look at the rest of them. Every couple of years, absolute, they rear back and elect an assembly of 13,000 members, a really efficient size for a deliberative body. So that sterling group elects a senate of 300 or so, and then goes home. But it reserves a lot of rights, like declaring war. And the senate, of course, goes ahead and elects the council. Which does its best to keep things going."

"I know the system," Thane broke in. "Just what do you want to do about it?"

"I don't want to do anything about it," Pyuf looked up earnestly. "I want to prevent it from being wiped out. And right now the only way that can be done is to work outside it, rather than through it. Or do you want to hold a systems election when the Darzent fleet surfaces at Onzar confluence?"

Manning Reine was on his feet now. "And they will, Thane, they will. We know there have been security leaks in the development of the drive. It's just a question of time."

Thane calmly reached over and took the bottle from Pyuf. He filled his glass and looked at the bottle, then at Pyuf, Astrid, and Reine. "All right. We have our bottleneck. And we have our cork—the Onzarian fleet. Just how do you propose we shove the cork into the bottle?"

Astrid was the first to answer. "We'll take the fleet! The Onzarians are ready for freedom!" After that they were all talking. The underground had convinced the people of the truth. They were ready to rise up and throw off the yoke of Candar. There was conflict between the government and the religion. The people would not stand any further reduction in their living standards. Two-thirds of the gross product went for armaments now, and the amount was steadily increasing.

At last Thane banged the desk until they had all stopped talking. He looked at them a moment in silence. "All right. You've got your gadgets. You've got your political

theory. You've even got your strategy. But there hasn't been an atom's worth of tactics in anything you've said, any of you. I think you're badly in need of some engineering for your revolution."

Astrid walked over and looked up into his eyes. "That's about the way it is, Roger. And that's why we need you so badly."

That was when they began going into details. Strength of the underground, possible allies, weaknesses of Candar . . . Thane was beginning to see the picture, and the tremendous obstacles to be overcome, when a buzzer sounded and a red light over the door blinked DANGER . . . DANGER . . . DANGER . . .

IV

PYUF ran over to a cabinet on the wall by the fire. Thane saw there were several dials and a visiscreen. As Pyuf twisted the dials he spoke rapidly over his shoulder to Thane. "We're quite isolated here. The house belongs to the old boy you met in the lab. He's been checked for security by Candar so we figured we were safe here. There's a detection screen about a kilometer hour from the house, and we have a force screen we can use as a last resort. Of course, we'd have to abandon this place once we did use it. Candar's detectors would pick it up right away."

The visiscreen came into focus and Pyuf turned the perimeter dial till it lined up with the degree mark on the disturbance indicator. Nine figures appeared, advancing toward the house. Three were short and squat—not over a meter and a half in height. They walked with the peculiar slouch of the Darzent entity in its humanoid phase. The other six were the Darzent robot infantry. Two and a half meters high, impervious to any hand weapon, with built-in blasters and the Darzent version of the Stoltz gun. Their ship was in the background. It had the outlines of an ordinary atmosphere jet of medium size, but there were alterations which made Thane suspect that it had been refitted for deep space, with at least the finite drive, and probably FTL.

Thane spun around to the others. "We either put up the force screen or get out now," he said. "Unless, that is, there's some heavy artillery around the house. Nothing else will stop a Darzent Robot. And even the screen probably won't last long. That ship looks as though it has enough high powered stuff to breach any screen we can put up."

Astrid looked up at him. "We do have the jet, Roger. It's armed, but it will take time to get it ready for take-off."

"Let's get the force screen up now, then."

Pyuf snapped switches. The whine of power at emergency levels began. The Darzent force had screen detectors, because they stopped at once and turned back to their ship. Short, sharp rocket blasts shot out from the bow tubes of the ship, as it turned on its axis to attack the force screen.

"Let's get going," Thane said.

"We all can't go," Pyuf pointed out. "Our jet is only two-place, and anyway, someone will have to cut off the screen to let the jet out."

"You and I can do it," Astrid said to Thane. "I can handle the engines and the defensive screens while you fly it and man the gun."

Thane considered quickly. If they succeeded in knocking out the Darzent forces they'd be able to get the others out without difficulty. If not, it would be wise to separate Astrid and her father. With one of them, the plan that was shaping up might succeed, but if both were lost there'd be no chance.

"All right," Thane said. "Let's go."

Just then the first attack on the screen came. There was vibration through the room and the needles of the indicators all jumped up over the red lines. The whine of power momentarily became a shriek and then died down.

"That was close," Thane said. "The sooner we stop them the better." He turned to Pyuf. "Drop the screen for two seconds when I signal, to let us out."

The bitterly cold wind cut into Astrid and Thane as they hurried outside. Astrid was ahead, leaning against the wind, running towards the outbuilding which housed the jet. They were in full view of the Darzent attackers who renewed their thrust at the screen when they saw the running figures.

"We won't take time to ease it out," Thane shouted above the wind. "Full power at the start. It'll knock over this shack but that's a small loss at the moment."

Thane climbed into the nose position of the little jet while Astrid slid in behind him. They ran a fast check while the engines warmed. Thane waited for the next attack on the force screen. It came and he gave a short sharp blast to signal their readiness. They had two seconds leeway before the screen went up again. The ship was not fully warmed. Thane flicked on all the rockets and gave the jet full throttle.

There was the barest hesitation, and then they were forced back in their seats, with 5G acceleration. The outbuilding flamed and collapsed behind them. As Thane went into semi-consciousness he pulled back on the control wheel to clear the hill ahead. The corners of his mouth pulled down, his eyeballs felt as if they were being forced down into his cheekbones. His vision became a red blur, then grey . . .

He came out and looked down. The house and the Darzent ship were tiny blurs in the storm, three kilometers below. He looked back at Astrid. "Make it all right?" he asked anxiously.

Her face was white and strained but she managed a smile. "Still with you, skipper. Let's get back down."

"HERE we go. Hang on and hope. Keep the screens up till I nod. Then drop them fast." Thane put the jet into a steep dive, lining up the Darzent ship in the sights of the Baring gun. He was ready to fire when there was a tremendous jolt and a flash of light. The little jet was thrown over on its back and Thane fought the controls to steady it.

He went into a climbing turn and saw, above and behind him, the long black shape of an Onzarian atmosphere cruiser. "The protector screens are dead," Astrid cried in alarm. "Whatever that was that hit us burned them out!"

"That was a disrupter." He pointed at the Onzarian cruiser. "Our visitor is playing for keeps." His knuckles went white as he pulled back on the wheel into another long climb with emergency power. Another disrupter burst behind them barely missed.

"They've got everything on us," he said. "Speed, firepower and range. Except maneuverability." He turned to Astrid. "Just how far out is the force screen from the house?"

"Four hundred meters."

"Let's see if we can judge it," he said grimly. "It's going to be close." He put the jet into a tight turn and slipped off into a steep, screaming dive. There was another disrupter burst and a sudden flutter of the controls. He fought them to maintain the dive, straight for the house and its invisible bubble of force. The flutter became worse as their speed increased, and vibration racked the whole ship. He judged the distance by the rangefinder on the Baring. At the last moment he pulled out and up. The ship skidded down sickeningly, and then caught. Thane fought bitterly to keep conscious.

They heard the explosion above the sound of the wind shrieking past them. Thane looked down and back. It had worked! The Onzar ship had followed them down, but it had not allowed for the invisible force screen. It had hit the screen, caromed off into a wild, twisting skid, and hit the ground, completely wrecked.

But Thane had time only for a glance. The vibration was getting worse. One more strain and the little jet would be torn to pieces.

He eased out of the climb and tried to put the jet into a long flat glide. It kept slipping off to the right, and the glide increased in steepness. The ground came up and he managed to pull back into a partial stall. At the last instant the jet dipped to the right and hit. It spun crazily on the ground, straightened, skidded and then buried itself in a drift of snow.

He was still numb with shock when he heard Astrid's voice. "What happened, Roger? Why did they attack us?"

"They must have been sent as soon as our force screen was detected. Let's get back."

They climbed out into the biting wind and started towards the house in the distance. The red sun of Onzar was setting and the cold deepened and chilled bitterly as they hurried on.

IT WAS almost dark when they reached the house. In the lengthening shadows there was no sign of the Darzent ship. They hurried on in growing fear. The front of the house showed the signs of the blast that had knocked out the force screen. Inside the

house was dark. All power had been burned out when the screen went. They went in through the smashed, tilted doorway. In the gloom they saw the old medic first. He was slumped in a chair against one wall. His neck was twisted and his head slanted back. His chest was a gaping hole, with the blood already frozen. His assistant lay beside the dead fire, headless. What had been Pyuf was at the instrument cabinet, one hand still on the fused panel. Manning Reine was not there.

There was a tremble of panic in Astrid's voice. "Roger, they killed them . . . and . . . where is Dad?"

"They killed them deliberately with hand weapons after they knocked down the screen. And they have your father now. That was their purpose."

"What will they do to him? Where have they taken him? Roger, we've got to find him!"

Roger Thane turned to her in the shambles of the wrecked room. The quaver in her voice indicated that she couldn't take much more. He took her arm and led her down the corridor to the laboratory. "We're going to fight back, Astrid, and we're going to win. Right now there's not much we can do for your father. But don't worry about him. He's safe. He's much too valuable to be mistreated by the Darzent Empire. But they will get everything they need from him with their interrogatory drugs."

In the laboratory nothing had been touched. Once the Darzent force had Reine they must have left at once. Astrid's shoulders were shaking as Thane led her to a chair. "We've got a lot to plan and a lot to do. It won't be easy and we'll be fighting all the way. But we'll win if we're steady."

Thane could see the effort Astrid was making. "I'm . . . I'm ready, Roger. Where do we start?"

"We'll start with what we have, the underground. And Astrid, the really important jobs may be up to you because I'm going to be out of circulation for a while." Astrid looked up with a question on her lips but he went on before she could voice it. "Pyuf mentioned that we have some support among the Onzarian priestesshood. Just what do we have?"

"There's been general dissatisfaction with Candar all through the religion," she said. Her voice was low, carefully controlled, with an undercurrent of stress. "The whole priestesshood feels that Candar is their enemy. They feel that Candar's eventual aim is to destroy every organization not under his direct control. Of course, the church also has a long tradition of remaining aloof from the temporal government. And outwardly, Candar has so far usually respected the church."

She looked up at Thane. "That's the general picture. Actual proved sympathizers with the underground are scarce, but we do have some important ones. Probably the most important is the Priestess of Keltar, Selan. As she's the head of the church in Keltar, the capitol city, she's at least nominally the head of the whole organization, though it does have a good deal of autonomy. But her word carries enormous weight."

"What's she like?"

"She's old. Very old and very determined. She's always been on the liberal wing of the church. Willing to recognize the changes that have taken place, and to modify the church so that it will maintain its place in the system. She recognizes Candar for what he is but is willing to try to get along with him till someone can show her an alternative with a chance of success. At least, that's how she seemed to me when I met her."

"Do you think," Thane asked, "that she would be ready to help now if it meant the overthrow of Candar?"

Astrid was silent for a long time. Finally she nodded. "I think so. I don't know but I think she would."

Thane glanced at his watch. It might do. And they just might have time for what had to be done. "It's the best chance we have, and it may work. But now we've got things to do. We can use some of the equipment here, and the batteries will give us enough power."

THANE rapidly explained that he was going back into his own identity, and that some of the equipment present would help accelerate the change-over. He tried to give Astrid the general picture as they made the circuit changes on the equipment.

"Astrid, you are going to turn me in. You are going to surrender me to the Onzarians when they get here."

Astrid stopped. She had been re-fusing a circuit, and the fuse hung limply in her hand, forgotten.

Thane went on. "I'll explain while we finish the circuit. We haven't much time. You remember how we talked of driving the cork into the bottle? Well, that's what we're going to do. The Onzarians will be here before long when they've discovered their cruiser is missing. You will pass as an Onzarian. As an acolyte of the religion, you'll turn me over to them as a spy."

They had finished the identity accelerator circuit. Thane wasn't sure the rough equipment would do, but it might be close enough. He'd try it. He climbed on to the laboratory table and showed Astrid how to make the connections.

"I'm using all the power we have," he said. "I'll be out about 13 minutes, absolute. If they get here before then do everything you can to keep them out till the time's up."

Astrid looked down at him lying on the table. She was very serious, very quiet. She brushed her lips lightly against his forehead and said softly, "We'll manage."

She was gone and Thane heard the hum of power.

It went on and on, in the easy world of change. And then the power was gone. Thane struggled to open his eyes, minutes, years before he should. He looked up into the cold, unfriendly eyes of an Onzarian lieutenant.

Astrid appeared beside the lieutenant. She talked rapidly in Onzarian. Her manner was imperious. "He's the one. He did it all. He attacked us here, and after he had killed the others he admitted to me that he was a spy for the A. S. He would have killed me, too, if you hadn't come, lieutenant."

The lieutenant said harshly, "He won't trouble anyone now. Candar, himself will deal with him."

Thane was pulled to his feet by two crew members. Each grasped one of his arms, and they took him out of the house to the waiting Onzar cruiser. Inside the ship one of them opened a reinforced door and shoved him into a tiny cell.

Thane had been in jails before on other systems. Their politics varied but their jails were about the same. He didn't like it, but he did know what to expect. There was the take-off, and the trip to the sector patrol station. The lieutenant told his story and they questioned him, in a cursory, routine way. He was an important political prisoner and there were experts to take care of the questioning later on. Then there was another ship, and they flew through the long, bitterly cold night to the capitol city, Keltar. More guards, more questions on arrival. The receiving station. And finally the trip through the ancient streets of Keltar to the palace prison.

The cell there was just as small, just as dark, just as dirty as the others. But at least he was in a cell by himself. He was alone, and would have time to think through his plan.

Time went by. Thane, without light, without sound, did not know how long. But long enough. Long enough for the Darzent Empire to learn about the second-stage drive, from a drugged Manning Reine. Long enough to begin to equip their fleet with the drive. Could one man stop their attack? Thane wondered, and planned, and waited impatiently.

No prison sounds. No noise of any kind. Until suddenly the duralite door opened. "Let's go," the gruff Onzarian voice said.

Outside the cell door Thane's eyes gradually focused in the light. The guard was one he hadn't seen when they'd brought him in. Apparently he'd been in the cell through at least one watch, possibly longer. They walked down the long row of doors to the registry room.

V

THE room was bare except for a bench along one wall, a chair and a small table. A non-com sat behind the table. He began to ask the usual questions. Thane answered in a flat, dull voice, and the non-com filled out a form, scribbling on a line or checking a box as each question was answered. Finally he shoved the form aside and looked up at Thane for the first time. "Oh, an Alien, eh? That should be interesting for you." He jerked a thumb at the bench. "Sit there till you're called." Thane went over to the bench. He saw that the non-com had lit a cigarette and was staring into endless boredom.

For long, empty minutes nothing happened. Then there was noise at the outer

doors. The doors opened and two burly guards entered. Astrid Reine was between them.

They dragged her up to the desk. "They told us to bring her here."

The non-com looked up. "What's the purpose?" That, Thane was sure, was the correct translation of the Onzarian. Not 'charge,' 'not offense,' but 'purpose.' It was a one-word explanation of Candar's whole system of justice.

". . . and she claimed to be an acolyte of the church," the bigger guard was saying. "Gave the name of a registered acolyte and everything. And funny thing, the Priestess of Keltar vouched for her. Had to let her go. But then we found out that the acolyte she was supposed to be was across the continent, in Akra. We picked her up just as she was leaving the cathedral." At the end of his long speech, the guard sucked in his breath and blew it out, hoarsely.

The non-com merely sighed, picked up his pad of forms, and began his questions. Astrid answered most of the questions in a monotone. She gave no sign that she had seen or recognized Thane. He noticed that on a few of her questions, her voice went up. He saw why.

The non-com had finished the body of his form and was filling in the "remarks." His stylus poised, he asked, "Why did you go to the priestess?"

Astrid's voice went up as she answered, "She's all right." Then her voice went back to a dull monotone. "I—I was confused. After I'd told them I was in the church I thought she would help me. But she couldn't."

"What were you trying to do?"

"I've done everything" she said in that slightly altered tone. "I don't know what I was going to do. I've been so confused." She bent her head and began to sob.

"Take her away," the non-com said. The two guards led her into the cell block. As they left, the intercom buzzed beside the non-com. He answered and gestured to Thane. "Time for you, Mister. Stand up and wait."

Two officers of the guard entered. The gold on the uniform of one indicated that he was at least a commander. They took him between them, without a word, and went out.

The wind tore at them as they walked across the palace court. Each sentry snapped to attention as they passed. Inside, they were inspected formally by a guard and more efficiently by a battery of detectors. They hurried on. After halls, corridors, steps, grav-wells, and more guards, they reached the door. One final check and they were through.

Glistered—that was the word—the whole room glistered. Gold inset in the wall panels. Golden arms on the chairs. Gold plating on the ceiling. A gold shagell, wings outstretched, at one corner of Candar's enormous desk. And Candar, in a perfectly plain uniform, staring up at him from behind the desk. His own expensive way, Thane considered, for showing his contempt for the gold fetish of the church.

Candar looked up at him steadily for a moment without speaking. Then: "I always greet the emissaries from the Allied Systems personally. They always have so much of interest to tell us in one way or another sooner or later."

Thane stared back and said, "You are right. I have information that will save Onzar if I give it to you. Perhaps, using your methods, you could get it eventually. Perhaps not. But eventually is too late, Candar."

Candar picked up a small gold knife. "Go on," he said, "but do not bluff. I do not like bluffs."

"There is no question of bluffing," Thane said impatiently. "But there are other matters that must be settled before I will go on."

"Just what would you have us settle, spy?" Candar asked sardonically.

"First, the matter of my own immunity. I'm being hunted throughout the Galaxy. The Allied Systems are searching for me. Darzent agents have attacked me twice. I have disregarded orders and I'm about to commit treason if I'm assured of safety."

Candar put down the knife and leaned forward. His voice showed his reluctant interest as well as his habitual suspicion. "Tell me why, spy. Why should I assure your safety?"

Thane said scornfully, "I didn't say that you should assure it. I said I wanted it assured. And it will be. If it isn't, you'll be wiped out, and what's left of the Onzar

system will be in slavery."

"You may think, Systems Spy, that you know the kind of death you will die if this is a trick," Candar said slowly and coldly. "But you do not. There are specialists here, experts whose life work is the gradual dispatching of men who try to trick Candar." He paused for a moment. "If you can prove what you say, I, Candar, will personally guarantee your safety and immunity."

Thane snorted. "You'll get your proof, but not on your personal guarantee. You'll transfer me to the custody of the church on the condition that I'll be turned back to you if I can't prove everything I say."

Candar pushed himself to his feet. Thane could see the veins throbbing in his forehead. "That's enough!" The harsh voice mounted to a roar. "You have insulted Onzar and its ruler." He turned to his officers. "Take him out. We'll see what he knows, and how much he can stand before his death."

THE room they entered was a spotlessly clean room, an antiseptic room. Thane wondered how often the blood was scrubbed from the floor as he recognized the instruments.

They pushed him into a chair and strapped him down. "Now let's see what he'll take," Candar said. The commander himself applied the fittings and turned on the switches. Then the pain came. In long shivering waves. No body pain. Just pure pain, applied directly to the synapses of his brain. It was unbearable—and then it got worse. It went up and up. Through a dim red haze, Thane saw Candar shove the dial up still another notch. Then he blanked out.

As he came back he looked up at them. Stinging drops of sweat blurred his vision but he managed to smile. "Now try your psychograph. Just try it. Here's what you'll read: *conditioned against physical torture. Brain waves lack stable pattern. History inconsistent. Standard drug susceptibility predicted negative.* Then decide, friends, if I'm bluffing."

Candar growled, "Do as he says."

The test was run. They looked at the results. All three of them walked over to the corner of the room behind him. With his head strapped he could not see them. He heard their conversation in undertones. He broke in. "There's your choice, Candar. Kill me or turn me over to the church. And if you're afraid to know what's coming, if you're afraid to know how you're going to die, you'd better kill me now."

There was a long silence. Then Candar: "Unstrap him." Candar walked up and stood before him as the straps were taken off. "You'll curse yourself for postponing the end, if this is a trick. The transfer papers will be prepared now." He gestured to the commander. "Bring him back to my chambers, and call the emissary of the church." The door slammed jarringly behind him as he strode out.

When the conditions were made out, signed and countersigned and sealed, and a copy transmitted to the Cathedral of Keltar, and when the young emissary in cloth-of-gold had signed the receipt for him, Thane began. "At this moment," he started, "the Darzent Empire is preparing an attack. They have a space-drive, stolen from the Allied Systems, which allows almost instantaneous travel through the Galaxy. You will learn of this drive, and you will learn something that Darzent does not know. You will learn how to locate any ship using this drive at any time the drive is in operation."

That was enough to stimulate Candar's driving, paranoid megalomania to the full. Thane had already threatened him with destruction. Now he held out to him the opportunity to be master of the Galaxy. Thane felt it would be simple now to obtain the transfer of Astrid to the custody of the church. He thought so, but there was another hour of argument before he had overcome Candar's suspicions and convinced him of the absolute necessity of having Astrid to supervise the building of the Tracer and the Drive.

At last it was settled. Then Thane committed his treason. He told all he knew, about the second-stage drive and the tracer, and when Astrid came in, she finished the job. Between them they gave away the most important secrets of the Galaxy to an enemy, a man of endless, pathologic ambition.

CANDAR, of course, wanted confirmation. It was fast in coming. With all the technical resources of Onzar at her disposal, Astrid had a prototype of the tracer in operation the following day. An hour

later the existence of a ship using the catalyst drive was reported by the tracer. Its position could not be determined until a base line had been established. The following day, three more tracers were set up at widely separated points across the planet. More movement of ships was reported—and they were definitely placed within the Darzent Empire. One more day passed, and more tracers had been set up on Onzar III, across the sun from the capitol planet.

At the same time, Candar pushed work on the second-stage drive with all possible speed. As Thane had guessed, the use of gold in the catalyst principle gave Candar pause, but only momentarily. It was true that such a use of gold violated one of the oldest and strongest taboos in the religion but Candar's hunger for power was stronger than his fear of revolt. As Thane had supposed, Candar went ahead with the development of the drive, thinking that when he had it his power would enable him to ignore the church. The church was powerful on just this system. With the drive, Candar would rule the Galaxy.

Candar had taken certain precautions. Almost complete radio silence had been clamped down, partially to prevent any information getting out, and partially to provide enough power for the tracer. No ships of any registry could enter or leave the system. Only his personal adherents of unquestioned loyalty were allowed to work on the assembly of the drive. But there were leaks. And there was Thane . . .

With one legal pretext after another, Candar had succeeded in keeping Thane in isolation within the palace for three days. Finally, he gave in to the demand of the church that Thane be turned over to the Cathedral. He did not want Thane loose but still he could not afford a break with the church just a few days before his great victory.

So Thane at last managed to see Selan in her personal chambers in the Keltar Cathedral. It was a small, comfortable room that did not seem to share the bleakness of most of Onzar. Perhaps, as much as anything, that was due to the personality of the Priestess Selan. She was very old. She had remained slim, and her lined face retained much of its original golden color. Her yellow eyes were alert. The only term Thane could think of for their expression was cynical compassion. She sat by a small writing table in one of the traditional, intricately carved chairs of Onzar.

"The developments of the past few days, Priestess Selan, are of extreme importance to Onzar and the church. The tracer device has already confirmed our belief that Darzent is preparing to attack. Already their trial maneuvers with the second stage drive have ceased, and they have begun the marshalling of their fleet. When they come, they must come through the Onzar confluence, not more than a parsec from this system. This attack must be stopped, and we hope that time enough is left."

"I am aware of these developments, Roger Thane," she said with a slight smile. "We still have our sources of information."

"Perhaps," Thane said, "you are also aware of the industrial use of gold in the second-stage drive?"

"We have heard rumors," she said wearily, "but perhaps my position on such matters is not clear to you. I have never been a religious doctrinaire. I have lived through tremendous changes on this planet, and I know that the church must conform to survive. You certainly must know that from the history of religions in your own system. The church is conservative, yes. It can never move with the skeptical flexibility of the politician or the scientist. But it must change with them, sometimes leading, sometimes following. Otherwise it becomes a thing of quaintness, a building without an institution, a place for tourists."

Thane regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. Even this brilliant, experienced woman would be ensnared by her own long-range theories into a disastrous inaction in the short-run crisis. And there would be no longe-range for her or her church unless there were victory in the present crisis. He said, "I agree with you completely. Like any organism, social or biological, the church must adapt to continue. It must survive. And the present situation is not merely one in which an ancient taboo is violated. It is a crisis of survival for you."

"I know," she said thoughtfully, "that Candar has never been friendly to the church. But I do not believe that he has the power to destroy it."

"Up to now," Thane answered, "Candar

has been limited. Now, with the drive, he feels that unlimited power is his. His dream is to crush the power of Darzent in this attack, and then to turn upon the Allied Systems. I do not know if his dream of complete domination of the Galaxy can be realized. I do not think so. But it is something he will not put away. And when he makes the attempt, it will mean the destruction of millions, the killing of whole planets, the ending of all life of whole systems.

"There is no need to keep the useless old taboos that no longer fit into the present world. But they should be ended by the church itself, in its own time and its own way, not abrogated by a contemptuous politician."

She looked half-convinced, and he pressed his point at once. "The power of the whole planetary communications system is now being used by Astrid Reine for the tracer system now being built. With a word from you the whole radio system will be at your disposal for as long as we can keep it open. You can at last tell the people of Onzar the truth, which they have not heard for so long."

Selan stared at the floor for a long time. Finally she looked up. "I don't know. I just don't know." She paused again, and it was a long, agonizing pause for Thane. "The decision is too large for me now. It is a seizure of authority that goes against my whole nature." She looked directly at Thane. "But, be assured, you will have my word in time. You and I will witness this battle of the confluence, and then you will know my decision."

Thane's mind was full of reasons why the old priestess should not travel out into space, with all the stresses of that travel, to a position of great danger. But he met her determined eyes and saw at once that all arguments would be futile.

He got up to leave, and with the sincerest of respect, lied to her. "Your decision will be mine, Priestess Selan."

VI

THE ship used by Selan in her trips through the system was little larger than the usual scout class but it had been completely refitted for her purposes. She'd had a special acceleration couch built in to allow her to survive the stress of space travel. And Thane noted that the large visiscreen would be ideal for watching the battle. And the communications system was larger than usual. It might do for his purpose.

They stayed well back from the restricted area where the whole Onzarian fleet was orbited. On the screen images appeared—twenty-three Class I cruisers, each with its own fleet of cruiser escorts, scouts, disruptor carriers, tenders and screen amplifiers. Swarms of independent tactical squadrons. Controlling all of them, ready to put them into instant action, was the battle-control cruiser, with its tracers, its receivers, its computers, its nearly automatic message center—and Candar and his staff.

Thane turned to the tracer that had been installed. Selan was by his side. He switched on its galactic screen. The Darzent marshalling was now almost complete. A few flashes of light still crossed the screen, crossing countless light years at each jump, pausing, and then a vault through more light years. As Thane and Selan watched, the flashes changed direction. The marshalling was complete, and the assembled might of Darzent was on its way. Thane found it hard to believe that even the fleet waiting before him could cope with all the force of Darzent.

The Darzent fleets had started from points spanning the whole Galaxy. With each flash of lights they converged, arrowing toward the Onzarian Confluence. Thane could imagine the watchers at similar screens in each ship of the battle fleet. Eyes becoming grimmer, nervous smiles appearing and disappearing on faces, hands clenching on instruments. And the waiting.

The flashing lights approached closer. The lead group of lights appeared, ten light years from the tiny orange circle marking the confluence. There was a pause—somewhat less than a second—and the lights appeared on the circle. Thane spun around to the visiscreen. The lead battle squadron of the Darzent Fleet had appeared there simultaneously, surfaced in space. Seven of the battle cruisers fired as one, and were joined by all the firepower of their escort ships.

The disruptor blasts, joining together, created a blinding sun in empty space. It was there. It was gone. And then just dead,

empty space again, but without the slightest hint that the lead squadron of the mighty Darzent Fleet had ever been there. Thane quickly looked over at the galactic map to see if they could have managed to get back into warp-line drive. No, there were no lights below the circle of the confluence. But another light was approaching from above, still ten light years away. Thane turned back to the visiscreen just as the second division of Onzar's fleet opened fire on the surfacing Darzent forces. Again utter annihilation.

The battle continued, with more surfacing squadrons, more eruption, disappearing suns. Thane turned away, losing interest in the well-planned slaughter. Here, a parsec away from the Onzar system, they were well outside the intersystems communication jam. Selan's horrified attention was still completely on the battle. Thane stepped back into the communications section of the scout and flicked the powerful space set into life. Static from the now almost constant disruptor blasts ripped and crackled across the hum of the set. There was just a chance, he considered, that he could get the relay station at Kadenar.

He worked rapidly, setting the frequency, the directional beam, the gain control. It was only a question of time before the detector would pick up the clear beam on the Onzar fleet, even in the midst of battle. At last it came through.

Across space, the automatic code responder finally could be heard. Thane gave his own code and said, "A direct to Garth. Top urgent."

"That code has been changed," the mechanical voice replied at once. Give current code."

"But I've been out of touch," Thane said, "and this must go through."

"That code has been changed," came the same, unvarying reply. "Give current code."

It was no use. With the mechanical monitor working he'd never get through. And of course they would have changed his code, after his disappearance and reported death. He began to talk rapidly giving his instructions. He couldn't get through to Garth, but there was the chance that someone would see the recording in time to act. Damn the mechanical efficiency of Liaison!

Now Selan was all he had to depend on. He started back to the forward compartment hoping that Selan had at last made her decision. The battle was still going on and lights were still flashing down the galactic screen to sudden, unwitting death. The bulk of the Darzent fleet had been destroyed and Thane saw that Candar had changed his tactics. Now, instead of disruptors, he was using concentrated, high-power Stoltz artillery.

After destroying the mass of their power, Candar was going to bring in the staff ships, with the fleet admirals as captives. It would immobilize whatever power Darzent had in reserve while Candar turned on the Allied Systems. Already, confused and blinded Darzent ships were drifting in space, with Onzar wrecker tugs swarming in on them.

Thane turned to the old priestess Selan. "Don't you see the crisis that is shaping? Don't you see what Candar intends? When this is done and he has re-powered, he'll turn on the Allied Systems. They'll fight back of course, but the war will make a shambles of the whole Galaxy. Don't you see?"

She turned slowly and looked at him. Her eyes seemed older, much more tired than they had before. "I have seen it, Roger Thane, and this cannot be repeated. It will not happen again. It is against all my training and belief and the tenets of the faith, but I, as Priestess of Keltar, will take it on myself to attack the temporal power."

THANE felt the sweat on his hands, and his smile was stiff though it was certainly heartfelt. So much depended on this woman's decision and on her performance from now on. Without the aid of Liaison to depend on it was up to this woman to prevent galactic war.

They started back for Onzar II and Keltar at once. They would have a good start on Candar while he was engaged in mopping up the Darzent fleet. Thane felt sure that Candar would stay to confront the high-ranking captives and to gloat over them. On the other hand Candar would not delay too long. He would be back to announce his victory and to prepare for the attack on the Allied Systems.

At the landing port outside Keltar, Selan's automatic anti-grav was waiting. It took them up over the outskirts of the bleak

wintry city and towards its center. As they reached the solidly built-up area Thane could see the dim outlines of the old city wall beneath them. Not so many years ago, as time went in the Galaxy, that wall had been a vital protection against the spears of the hill men. And now Onzarians were in space, blasting away the power of a third of the Galaxy. But still, the descendents of the hill men, the descendents of the plains dweller, the city builders, were living here, underneath him.

In the midst of their technological revolution they were still living in their ancient superstitions. Still the old awe of the Word of the matriarchal, matrilineal church. Still the compulsion to have their little gold symbols of rank sanctified and made real. Still the . . . Thane paused in his thoughts as he saw flames leaping into the night sky from a blast furnace, producing some of the finest alloys in the Galaxy. It was still the same, he hoped.

In another moment they were over the towering white shaft of the communications center. Then they slowly let down. Thane thought that Candar's constant suspicion, his unending compulsion for infinite control, direct control, was playing into their hands here. The communications center was exactly that. It controlled all electronic communications with the capitol system, and could easily tie in with subject systems. But how much time did they have? Thane didn't know. With luck, they'd have a few vital moments for the voice of the Holy Church to go out over the planets.

The anti-grav settled gently on the upper terrace. Thane helped Selan out into the stinging cold of the Onzar night. Just inside the gloomy passage to the grav-well a harsh voice sounded. "Halt!"

They stopped. Thane made out a uniformed man, his hand on his holster.

"We have come at the call of Astrid Reine," Thane said. "She wishes our assistance."

"All who come for the thirteenth level must have the code word. Give it and you will pass."

Thane's right arm went up and the side of his stiff hand flashed down, hitting the sentry between his neck and shoulder. The man's pistol was almost aimed at Thane when Thane hit. The guard relaxed and gently fell into an inert heap on the deck. Thane bent and took the blaster from the guard's inert fingers. He looked a moment and found a Stoltz. He took that, too. He straightened up and turned to Selan. "Sorry," he said. "We can't risk an examination now, and there's no time to lose. He'll be all right." Thane picked up a hand-control from the ledge in the sentry's cubicle and led Selan to the well.

They dropped gently, interminably. At last they reached "13." From the distance they had dropped, Thane judged they were far underground if this grav-well was timed as most were. He held Selan's arm and stopped their descent with his hand control.

They stepped out into a darkened corridor. A sentry was waiting. There was no 'halt!' this time. Without a signal from the roof they were automatically enemies. The blast echoed along the corridor. In the dim light the sentry's aim had not been good but Thane felt the first sting in his right arm. He aimed and fired the blaster with his left hand, and thus solved the problem of the sentry. They went down the corridor.

Thane pushed open the first lighted door with his foot, his right arm hanging useless. The blaster was ready in his left. Astrid looked up, sitting at a table. She ran to him.

"Roger, you did make it. You can't know how hard this waiting has been. I was sure you would make it but I've gone through days without hearing a thing."

He held her clumsily with his left arm, the hand still gripping the blaster, and winced when she pressed against his right shoulder. "We've made it so far, Astrid," he said, "but the biggest job is still ahead. How long can we keep the channels open for a newscast?"

Astrid stepped back, puzzled. "As far as the power goes, indefinitely, I believe. Of course there haven't been any newscasts since I've been here. All the power has been used for the Tracer. But it's easy enough to switch over. And all the other planet stations and systems stations are primarily just amplifiers and transmitters for this one."

"If the broadcasts haven't been on the air, what about the receivers? Will anyone be listening if we put a speech on?"

Astrid smiled. "We can take care of that. Candar installed a system for use on his own speeches. Each receiver automatically goes

on when he is speaking."

"That's it, then," Thane said. "Switch all the power from the Tracer to the newscast beam. Put the Priestess on the circuit and I'll try to keep it open." He turned to Selan. "How long will you need?"

"Ten minutes will be enough," she said with determination.

"Let's make it fifteen to be sure," Thane said. "I'll be on the roof doing what I can to hold off whoever shows up. Meet me there in fifteen minutes if everything is all right, or come at once if anything at all goes wrong."

Astrid noticed that he had been hurt. "Your arm, Roger! What happened? Can I do anything for it?" The deeply concerned look in her eyes made him feel that he was a little more to her than just a part of an underground conspiracy.

"The arm's all right," he said. "A sentry grazed it. I'll see you." He turned away and started back for the roof.

VII

THERE was a throbbing ache in his arm as he went back up the grav-well. He held the control in his teeth and twisted it with his left hand as he reached the roof level. He stepped out. The cold had deepened and the wind was bitter. He stepped over the unconscious sentry and placed his guns on the ledge before him. He twisted the dial of the Stoltz to 'lethal' and to 'max area.' With that sort of adjustment the Stoltz was dependable only for very short ranges, but he had to have something ready against a mass attack. The blaster was a precision, aimed weapon, and would do for one at a time.

The cold soaked in. His arm numbed and then ached, and numbed again. Thane waited. He had no way of knowing what Selan was saying or what effect it had in the minds of the Onzarians. Or did he? The normal street noises below seemed to be changing. Through the noise of the wind, a dull, confused murmur came up from below. That might be mass anger.

Thane picked up the blaster and walked over to the parapet. Far below he could see that crowds were beginning to gather in the street. Some were clumped around street loudspeakers.

There was a hum overhead. Thane spun around and looked up. A police patrol was just overhead. As it settled Thane threw himself flat on the icy tile. There was an immediate shrieking pain from his injured right arm. He gritted his teeth and aimed as the door of the anti-grav opened. The flash of his blaster was a bright orange in the night air. The man on his side crumpled. Thane was on his feet at once and dashed to the door of the patrol. One more flash of the blaster and the other occupant tumbled out the other side.

Thane hurried back to the sentry booth for his Stoltz. There would be more. As he reached it something hit him hard. He fell back towards the patrol anti-grav. He was fighting desperately. A hand went around his throat and tightened. A knee came down on his right arm. He wavered on the brink of unconsciousness. He fought his way back.

He jabbed savagely with the stiff fingers of his left hand and caught his opponent under the jaw. Thane pushed upward and back as hard as he could. Thane felt the hand loosen on his throat. Thane came up as the man went back. As they both reached their feet Thane saw it was the sentry. They struggled for a moment on the edge of the parapet. Then the sentry made a last grasp at Thane and went over.

Thane felt the sweat condense and freeze under his clothes as he searched for his lost blaster. He found it and started back for the entryway. Three more police ships were coming towards the roof. At that moment the grav-well door slid open and Astrid and Selan stood before him.

The first police ship fired before it landed. The blast came before Thane had reached Astrid and Selan. He saw Selan crumple. She was dead when he touched her. He had the impulse to do something, to say something, for one who had forced herself to do so much. But there was no time. He thrust the blaster at Astrid, who was still staring at the dead Selan. "I'll try to get them with the Stoltz. You hit anything that's dangerous with this!" He grasped the Stoltz from the ledge and stepped forward. Running figures were coming towards them now. He waited with a weary sort of calm for them to come close enough. An explosion burst the tile just off his right heel. He waited. Finally he pressed

the impeller of the Stoltz. The wide-angle shot dissipated the power, but it did include all of them. They kept coming forward. One of them raised an arm and there was a blinding flash. Thane firmly pressed the impeller again as he fell forward.

THERE was a voice, and Thane tried to get ready for what was coming but it was too much effort. Anyway, the voice went away. And then someone else was there, and someone else was saying something important, if he could only catch it . . . and then movement, up, and around, and down.

When Thane finally opened his eyes Garth was standing over him biting his cigar. "They tell me you've committed treason," Garth said.

Thane looked up at him steadily. "I guess that's right," he said.

"I suppose you know what we're going to do."

"I suppose so . . ." and Thane stopped. Full memory was coming back, and all its implications. "Wait . . . it's all wrong. What are you doing here? And where is here? And . . . if you're here—if we're together, then it must have worked! It must have worked!"

Garth lit his cigar. His face changed slightly. It might have been a smile. "Yes. It worked. The old girl really hit the Onzarians. They hadn't heard any news at all in all the days of radio silence. Then their sets came on and there she was telling them that all their gold gimmicks were no good any more. That death was approaching for all of Onzar. That Candar had . . . well, you can hear the recording of it. She meant every word and they acted as if they believed every word. Of course, they'd been conditioned to that with the propaganda newscasts. But after the long silence she really hit them."

Some one moved at Thane's other side. He turned his head. It was Astrid. She was scowling at Garth. "You're a mean, bitter old bureaucrat," she said mockingly, "talking to Roger like that."

Garth's face twisted into the approximation of a grin. "Well, there actually were treason charges against him for a time. But I will say that things have changed."

Thane looked from one to another and then overhead. What he could see of the room looked vaguely familiar, but . . . "Where are we?"

"At the space station," Astrid said. "Dad and Garth are working over a treaty between Onzar and the Allied Systems."

"Dad? Then Dr. Reine was rescued? But how?"

They both started talking. A moment later Manning Reine joined them, looking paler and more haggard than before. All three of them talked, constantly interrupting each other. Gradually Thane got the essential details.

After the first impulsive, unorganized revolt, the church took over. It, at least, had an organization. A large part of the armed forces had joined in. Some, though, had stayed on Candar's side, and there had been sharp, bitter fighting. But by the time Candar landed it was about over. This was his greatest victory. He had destroyed the power of Darzent, and was bringing back, as captives, most of the leadership of the fleet and of Darzent. In addition, there was Dr. Reine, who had been discovered in captivity, on the leading staff ship. But when Candar stepped out into the spaceport, instead of meeting his adulating subjects, a very determined group of his own soldiers stopped him.

Thane finally turned to Astrid. "But how did we get away? The last I remember . . ."

"You got them all, Roger. One of them hit your leg with a blaster as he went down. All I had to do was to get you to the antigrav, and out of there."

Thane moved the leg, experimentally, and winced. "How is it?"

"Surface burn and shock," Astrid said. "In a week you can ski on it."

"Skiing—haven't done that since I was at Earth University." He thought for a moment. "How did you get into it, Garth? Did my message get through to Liaison?"

"Oh, yes. We picked up the recording an hour or so after it was recorded. I listened to it myself, and it convinced me. It sounded like you, and I could sort of see what you might have done. I shoved every available Liaison in the adjacent sectors right into Onzar, on my own responsibility. It worked out as it turned out. All they had to do was to clean up the tag-end of things."

ZERO DATA

By CHARLES SAPHRO

All the intricate, electronic witchery of the 21st century could not pin guilt on fabulous Lonnie Raichi, the irreproachable philanthropist. But Jason, the cop, was sweating it out . . . searching for that fourth and final and all-knowing rule that would knock Lonnie's "triple ethic" for a gala loop.

LONNIE RAICHI was small, heavily built, wet-eyed, dapper and successful. His success he attributed entirely to his philosophy.

Not knowing about Lonnie's philosophy, the whole twenty-odd years of Lonnie's success was the abiding crux of Jason's disgust. And this, in spite of the more and more men Jason came to control and the fitful stream of new techniques and equipment Gov-Pol and Gov-Mil Labs put at his disposal.

Jason was a cop. In fact, by this Friday the Thirteenth in the Fall of 2009, squirming on what had come to be his pet Gov-Park bench right across from the Tiara of Wold in the Fane, he was only one step short of being the Head Cop of Government City. He was good. Gathering in a lot of criminals was what had brought him up the steps.

But he hadn't gathered in Lonnie.

It wasn't for lack for trying. Way back, when Lonnie was known simply as "Lonnie," Jason managed to get a little help from his associates and superiors. Sometimes.

But as Lonnie came to be known as Lon Raichi, then Mr. Raichi, and finally as "THE Launcelot Raichi" (to Everyone Who Mattered), and as Jason's promotions kept pace with his widening experience and painstakingly acquired knowledge; peculiarly, there seemed to be fewer and fewer persons around who could be made interested in "Lonnie."

Inside Government and Gov-Pol-Anx as well as among the general Two-Worlds public.

So Jason got less and less help, or even passive cooperation, from his superiors. As a matter of fact, the more men he could command, the fewer he could use on anything that could be construed as concerning Lonnie.

Equipment, though, was a little different matter. There was usually enough so that one unit of a kind could be unobtrusively trained on Mr. Raichi under the care of Jason's own desk sergeant. In 1999, for example, Moglaut, that erratic and secretive genius in Physlab Nine, came out with a quantum analyzer and probability reproducer. The machine installed in Pol-Anx, reconstructed crimes and identified the probable criminals by their modus operandi and the physical traces they couldn't avoid leaving at the un-mercy of any of its portable data accumulators.

On Jason's first attempt it almost came close to Lonnie. It did gather in the hidden, dead, still twitching, completely uncommunicative carcasses of the five men who actually relieved the vault of the Citizen's Bank of Berlin of its clutch of millions. It even identified the body of the rocopilot found floating in the Potomac a few days later as being one of the group, and the killer. It did *not* locate the arsonized remnants of the plane, though, nor the currency; and only achieved the casting of a slight, or subsidiary, third-hand aspersion in the direction of THE Launcelot Raichi.

But Lonnie came up with an irrefutable alibi, somehow, and the hassle that followed made Jason's luck run out. And on Jason's stubborn, secret, subsequent tries, all the analyzer could produce was a report of zero data whenever Jason, reasonably or unreasonably, believed that Lonnie was involved.

Every time.

Zero data when Schicklehitler's marshal's



Lonnie on his dream throne . . . Jason at his instruments.
Was the struggle endless between these two?

baton disappeared from the British Museum.

Zero data when Charlemagne's Crown lapsed unobtrusively from its shrine in Vienna during the Year 2000 Celebration.

Subsequently, Jason realized that the Berlin job in 1999 had marked Lonnie's last essay after money. Other things seemed to occupy Lonnie's mind after he'd sprouted publicly into the status of full-fledged, hyper-respectable, inter-planetary business tycoon; complete with a many-tentacled industrial organization in Moon Colony and a far-flung prospecting unit headquartering at Mars Equatorial.

Tycoonship was a status with which Everyone Who Mattered was always pleased.

Jason's next attempt on Lonnie had to wait until 2005 and was the result of two unconnected circumstances. The first was Physlab Nine's secretive genius, Moglaut, evolving another piece of equipment, a disarmer, which, subsequent to its first use, saved countless cops' lives. The second was the discovery in the Valley of Kings, of Amenhotep III's own personal official Uraeus. Positively identified beyond the shadow of doubt.

Jason, playing the hunch he'd built up about Lonnie, rushed a man, armed with the brand new disarmer, instantly to the scene.

The next morning, Amenhotep's Uraeus was gone and the corpse of Jason's man was found—part of it. The right hand, arm, shoulder, and most of the head were missing; burned away. And of the disarmer, only a fused hunk of mixed metals and silver helix remained.

And the analyzer reported zero data.

Lab Nine's taciturn and exasperating Moglaut failed to derive an explanation for either circumstance.

"I won't shut up," Jason said, standing on the carpet in front of his superior. "He did it. I don't know how, but he did."

Another spasm of frustration shook him and he slammed his fist down on the sacred desk. "I've known Lonnie all my life. I know he doesn't know phfut about anything scientific, and yet he makes a horse's—"

"Captain Jason, I insist that you stop referring to—"

"Makes a—" Jason raised his voice, "horse's—"

"CAPTAIN JASON!"

Jason subsided.

"Captain, Annex has been most forebearing all these years. We've overlooked your incomprehensible phobia—this—this confoundedly unfounded impossible bias against such an irreproachable philanthropist as Launcelot Raichi—because of the sterling quality of your . . . ah . . . other work. However—"

On the desk, the Commissioner's fingers took up a measured tattoo. "—should this fixed idea begain to encroach on—uh—uh—"

"All right . . . Sir." Sullenly, Jason submitted. "I understand."

With a self-congratulatory smirk up at the ceiling that separated them from Executive Level, the bland face of the Commissioner smoothed out. "All right, Captain, as long as we understand each other . . ."

Sourly, Jason got himself back to his own office. Drumming his own fingers on his own desk and glaring at his own desk sergeant, he purged his soul.

"—damned equipment would only work, I'd gather him in! They couldn't stop me, then! But—" Jason choked. When he could speak again, "He's never studied a lick in his life, I tell you! Yet he makes a he-cow's behind out of the best man and the best scientific equipment Annex can provide! How? How, I ask you! He doesn't know the first blasted thing about any blasted thing in any blasted science!"

THAT was true. Conversely, Jason didn't know about Lonnie's philosophy.

Nowadays, Lonnie called it a "philosophy." He told reporters it was "based on a triple ethic." (Inside his skull, a small boy jumped up and down in glee over the magnificent language he was able to use.) But he always replied only with a superior smile when asked by reporters to put the philosophy and the triple ethic into words. If pressed, he paraphrased an Ancient Man: "You know my works. Judge by them."

He was referring, of course, to his having branched out into patronizing the Arts. He'd even erected Raichi Museum just across the velvety green circle of Gov-Park from Government's own Fane of Artifacts.

The reporters would go away and write

more articles about his modesty and the superlative treasures of Earth, Moon and Mars that were gathered in the Raichi Galleries; protected, the papers always boasted, by the same ultra-safety mechanisms that guarded the mile-long, one gallery wide, glass-fronted Fane itself. Government affably made up two of every anti-break-and-entry device nowadays. One for the Fane and the other for Raichi Museum.

Despite occasional grumbles in the letters-to-the-editor columns, the papers never seemed to inquire into why so many priceless trans-worlds artifacts got into Lonnie's private ownership instead of Government's public Fane. And while some artists and architects (unendowed by Lonnie) succeeded in publicly proclaiming Raichi Museum gaudy, such carpings were but to be expected, particularly from modernists.

Actually, Everyone Who Mattered felt Raichi Museum's granite walls were much more dignified than the narrow, glass-faced arcade that was the Fane, wide open to the most disrespectfully casual public inspection all the time. Why, even late at night gawking loiterers pressed their noses against the glass; black, clumsy images pinned to the blazing whiteness hurled by radionic tubes against the backwall of snowy marble from Mars' arctic quarries. Besides, that glass, proof though it was against anything but an atomic explosion, still made every true art lover feel disquietingly insecure.

No, on the whole, the papers and reporters and true art lovers who felt the Public's treasures should be more secure than visible, never questioned Lonnie's doing good to so much Art.

Thus, nowadays, nobody did anything but accept Lonnie. Except Jason. And he, perforce, took out his disgust not on hounding the sacrosanct Lonnie, but on that crackpot, mumchaunce, captive genius of Physlab Nine. With the result that, late in 2007, Pol-Anx had an electronic servo-tracer.

Pending construction of sufficient hundreds of thousands more for full Anx use, Jason swore Lab Nine to secrecy and installed the pilot model in his own office. He had enough authority for that.

It was a hellishly unbuildable and deceptively simple gadget, that tracer. Simply tune it in on the encephelo-aura, the brain wave pattern of any individual . . . and monitor. It never let go until deliberately switched off by the operator. It tracked; pinpointed the subject accurately up to twenty thousand miles. It stopped humming and started panting in proportionately ascending decibels when the subject became tense, nervous, afraid. It also directed pocket-sized trackers of its own Damoclean beam. It made it a cinch to gather in known criminals in the very midst of their first subsequent flagrante delecto.

Jason latched the servo-tracer on Lonnie and settled down to wait.

At 10 p.m., local mean time, January 25, 2008, the tracer hiccupped and, all by itself, *went to sleep!*

Jason blinked. Jiggled the gadget. Swore. Either the gadget was haywire or Lonnie was up to something, and, as usual, was making a—

Jason bawled for four reliable squad men he'd mentally selected before. If he could find Lonnie—catch Lonnie in actual performance of an act—then Commissioner or no Commissioner, Executive Level or no Executive Level . . . !

He roared from Pol-Anx with the men, past the flank of Government Fane, across the Park and around the bulk of Raichi Museum to Lonnie's mansion in its shadow. Leaped from the gyro-van, sweeping his men out into a fan for the neighborhood.

Nothing. Placid. Tree-shadowed, lawn-swept streets, ebony and silver in the light the moon reflected from solar space.

He'd missed. Too late. Lonnie was gone . . . or was he?

Jason didn't give himself time to think; his men time to get even a momentary hesitation started. He shoved his thumb hard against the door chimes and his shield under the butler's nose.

Yes, Mr. Raichi was at home. Then, after an interval nicely calculated to allow Jason to feel how acutely precarious his position stood, "Mr. Raichi is accessible."

Lonnie was bland. Blandly accepting Jason's urgent story of a known . . . er . . . jewel thief traced to the neighborhood. Blandly amenable to Jason's suggestion that his men be permitted to go over the mansion (once he'd started this damnfool caper, he had to go through with it). Lonnie so bland

that Jason felt a skitter of perspiration down his backbone while his men hustled up the soaring circle of the stair.

II

"SINCE I've been disturbed anyway," Lonnie offered, "I'll show you around."

"Thanks," Jason shook his head stiffly. "I'll just wait."

"I think you should come."

Shrugging, Jason followed, eyes stubbornly downcast.

" . . . my library . . . my den . . . bar. Care for a drink? Well, suit yourself." As the lights of the den dimmed and one wall swooshed smoothly into the ceiling. "My theatre . . . The usual tri-di stereo, of course, but I've had a couple of the new tight beams installed to channel Moon and Mars on the cube. Much better than the usual staged bilge. Say, that reminds me, a couple hours ago Mars projector had a scanner on one of the exploration parties caught out in a psychosonic storm. Jove, did they wriggle! Even in atomsuits they were better than Messalina Magdalen working on her last G-string. Here, I'll switch it on. Maybe the rescue team's—"

Building up inside the hundreds of thousands of layers of crystallized plastic came a reddish, three dimensional landscape, as if viewed from a height. Orange dust swirled across a gaunt, clawed plain under a transparent pink haze. A feeling as of sub-visual vibration, emanating from the cube, tugged at Jason's eyelids.

No life.

"—Nope; they've cleaned up the carcasses already. Too bad. Tell you what, though. Next time I catch it happening, I'll phone you and—"

"Don't bother."

"Suit yourself." Lonnie shifted and went on, lightly. "I'm not at all satisfied with the color, are you? It's off a little, don't you think? . . . Well? . . . Well!"

Unwillingly, Jason moved his attention to the cube. Eyes widening, he studied it. "No. You're wrong. That's good! The tech who poured that stereo did a damned good job. It's—"

"Not good enough for me! That's not exactly what I saw up at Vulcan City. If those lazy—"

"Look, you can't expect exactly the same reflectivity from crystallized plastic that you get from molecules of atmosphere, no matter how scientifically the pouring and layering is controlled. It's—they're two different materials. Leaving aside the ion-index differential and quality of incident light, you still can't—"

"*I* can . . ." As the pause lengthened, Jason's gaze was finally drawn to Lonnie's face. "You still haven't changed a bit, have you, Jasey? Still all wrapped up in *how* any collection of doodads work instead of just for what it'll do. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if that hasn't always been the difference between us. Where's it got you?"

Jason strode for the door.

"Wait a minute." Lonnie's voice came louder. "Better wait, copper. I'm not through . . . That's better."

From behind Jason came the sound of rubbing palms. "We've come a long way from Gimlet Street, haven't we, Jasey? You particularly. Captain. Promotions. Pay raises . . ." Then Lonnie was in front of him, staring up. "You're quite a substantial citizen now. Yes? Well, look at that. Go on, look at it."

Against the side wall stood a gigantic triptych. More than life size, the central panel canopied the statue of a Mongol potentate; the two side wings, a pair of guards in bas relief. All three wrought in chryselephantine gold and ivory; the gold with flowing pallid highlights. Damascened armor, encrusted with jewels, girdled the chest of the Asiatic Prince; helmeted the sullen head carved from a single immensity of ivory.

Ruby eyes glared arrogantly under ebon brows. Against the statue's folded shins, its pommel negligently gripped by one immovable, ivory hand, leaned a short Turkish scimitar of watered steel. Beneath the carved hassock upon which the statue sat, a dais of three steps fell away to the floor.

"That's Genghis Khan," Lonnie said. "I had him made. That isn't gold he's made of; that's aureum—and it cost plenty to have the silver mixed in. It makes it better. And I get the best! A hundred thousand, it cost me. And thirty-six thousand more to brace the wall and floor. It's good. It's the best that's made!"

He came up on tiptoe, thrusting his chin as close as possible to Jason's averted face. "Why don't you buy one for your place, Captain?"

JASON stared into the malevolent eyes of the statue.

"Huh . . . hu-hu . . . hu-ha-ha-ha . . ." At the dais, Lonnie put his foot on the second step and patted Genghis Khan familiarly on one ivory knee. "I like this old boy. He had the right idea. I have it. You haven't. You never had. If you had, you'd'a listened to the proposition I made you way back then. Remember when Aggie told you about it? Say, I wonder what's become of her, anyway. Do you know? What? What'd you say?"

Jason cleared his throat. Hard.

"Well?"

Jason swallowed. Blood pounded in his temples.

"Jasey, you're stupid."

Jason made his eyes close. Let them reopen slowly.

"You were born stupid and you've stayed stupid."

Still Jason held back an answer.

"You're nothing but a stupid, go-where-you're-sent, do-what-you're-told cop! What do you say to that! If you want to keep on being one, answer me! Answer me!"

Deliberately, Jason jerked his chin at the statue. "That's another example of what I mean."

"*What?* ! !" screamed Lonnie.

"Reflectivity. The silver in the gold. Two different metals and where they're not well fused. That sword blade, too. Just the misalignment of molecules in the surface of the steel makes it look wavy, and ripple when the light changes or you move. Different even in two parts of the same material. That's why you can't get the stereo cube to reproduce color-feel exactly." Breathing heavily, Jason had to let his voice fade out.

"Gaaa . . ." Lonnie convulsed. "Who cares!" Laugh sounds rolled out of his throat. "You'll never change."

He flicked his hand at Jason, brushing him away.

But, as Jason, white-faced, herded his men out through the costly grandeurs of the vestibule, Lonnie called from the inner hall: "Copper . . ."

Jason turned, waited.

"You amused me, so it's all right this time. You can keep your penny-ante job. But don't try for me again. You cross my path again, I'll smear you. And what's more, I'll use whatever you're trying, to smear you with. Get that! Get it good! Now get out!"

Back in Jason's office, the desk sergeant reported as Jason came in. "Funny thing. That there tracer started to hum again soon after you was out for a while. Quit again 'bout five minutes ago, though."

Jason gritted his teeth, banished the sergeant, and spent five minutes alone gripping the edge of his desk. Then he yanked Lab Nine's silent genius down to his office. That didn't help for the tracer stayed asleep. Not even a hiccup rewarded Moglaut's most active efforts on Lonnie's wave length. On others, fine. Through the night and on into the next day. Jason kept Moglaut at work.

Late in the morning, Authority at Peiping televised publicly that the Mace of Alexander was gone from its satin pillow in the proof-glass case in the alarm-wired room off the machine-weapon-guarded main corridor of the security-policed Temple of Mankind.

The Mace, symbol of Alexander's power, was a pretty little baton barely two feet long. Its staff was mastodon ivory, the paleontologists had determined. One end sported a solid ball of gold hardly as big as a fist; studded with rubies, but none set quite so close as to actually touch.

The other end, balancing the ball of gold, mounted the largest single polished emerald crystal in the discovered universe. Neither the Moon or Mars had produced anything in the emerald line equivalent to what had come out of the mists of Earthly history.

DISREGARDING the bulletin, Jason kept Moglaut at the servo-tracer. In the night's smallest hours it began placidly to hum on Lonnie's aura again.

"What happened?" Jason said. "What did you do?"

Moglaut shrugged.

"You must have done something. What was it?"

Moglaut, not looking up from the purring machine, shook his head.

"All right. You can go now." Jason

watched the genius disappear hurriedly through the door. From the door he watched the man scutter down the long, long corridor out of sight. The first thing in the morning, Jason promised himself, he'd have a session about Moglaut with Lab Nine's chief.

The first thing in the morning brought word that Lab Nine's erratic genius had stumbled himself out of the seventeenth floor window of his suburban apartment to his death. Lab Nine's chief clucked sorrowfully.

Jason shook his head and wondered. After exhaustive investigation (zero data) he still wondered. That's all he was able to do, wonder.

The second time Jason's servo-tracer on Lonnie hiccupped and dozed off was at 12:01 a.m. August 7th, 2008, just one day after the Diamond Throne arrived on Earth. The single, glittering diamond crystal, misshapen like an armchair and larger than one, had been mined out of the core of Tycho's crater. And it was also just two days before the Moon Throne would have been installed in the unbreakable safety of Raichi Museum!

"Jason, you're insane," his superior told him when Jason, reinforced by an astounding public furore, brought the matter up. "He owned it. He had no reason to steal it from himself. Besides, one man alone couldn't budge that enormous—"

"It won't do any harm to look-see."

"It can do a lot of harm!" The Commissioner glanced quickly at the ceiling. "I'll have nothing to do with it. That's all."

Officially, Jason's hands were tied. But secretly he maneuvered the transfer of a five-layers-down undercover man from Madras to Government City. And, coincidentally, in the ordinary routine of operation, Raichi Museum took on a new janitor; a little brown man who grinned constantly and was fanatical about dust. He was a good, reliable man and when he reported that neither the Diamond Throne nor any of the other missing glories were anywhere in the Museum, Jason had to believe him.

As a matter of fact, it wouldn't have done Jason any good to have installed the little brown man in Lonnie's mansion, either. *The lock*—not the apparent one openly in the den door, but the real one—was as unobtrusive and foolproof as Twenty-first Century engineering could make it. And Lonnie always made sure he was alone and unobserved in the den before he locked it and sauntered across to bestow a peculiar, multiple tweak to the nose of Genghis Khan.

He enjoyed the gesture. On Christmas Eve he grinned broadly while the triptych pivoted in the wall, let him off in the Kruppmartite-walled, pulsing radiance of his very secret, very, very personal throne room, and swung back into place.

His grin changed to an expression of imperial dignity as he encased himself in Catherine the Great's ermine Robe of State and grasped the Mace of Alexander in his good left hand. But then the royal mien gave way to a sullen scowl as he hesitated between Charlemagne's Crown and Amenhotep's Ureaus.

Actually, neither one was worthy of him. Both purely regional coronets belonged over in the farthest dusty corner behind the curtain, along with Schicklehitler's shabby baton and that crummy Peacock Throne. What he really needed was a crown worthily symbolic of the position he'd make it possible to publicly assume in the not-too-distant future.

It was a damned imposition that he had to put up with. Well, he'd make them do since they were the best to be had. Adjusting the Crown of Charlemagne upon his brow, he stood on tiptoe to wriggle his way back into the embrace of the titanic crystal that was the Diamond Throne. There, he relaxed and gave himself over to the contemplation of the glories of Lonnie.

Who but he had developed such an efficient philosophy to such an unfailingly incisive point? Certainly not Old Boswell who, back in the early days had thought to be teaching him.

"Rule One, my boy," he remembered the old patrician twittering, "there's always someone to pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you—for a price. Pay it. Then add a plus to the payment and the man's yours to use again and again."

But even in those days as a callow, trusting youth, he'd been smarter than Boswell. Observing, from the safety of the sidelines, the way the old fool had finally tripped up, he'd added a codicil of his own to Rule

One: "Make sure the payment's *final*!"

(. . . witness the Berlin chestnut pullers. And the unobtrusive and undiscovered spate of their predecessors whose usefulness had become outweighed . . .)

Then Boswell had said, "Rule Two: You don't have to know the how of anything. All you have to know is *the man who does*. He always has a price. The currency is usually odd, but find it, pay it, then proceed per Rule One."

Even tonight, in his own Throne Room, Lonnie flushed heavily at the way he'd accepted at face value what came next. "By the way," Old Boswell had added smoothly, "no connection of course, my boy, but the topic reminded me. Here are the keys to that daffodil-hued tri-phibian you ogled at Sporter's exhibit. I must admit you have an eye for dashing machinery even though I can't agree with your esthetics. No—no . . . It's yours. I feel that you've earned it and more by—"

He'd rushed to the garage to gloat over the mono-cyclic, gyro-stabilized, U-powered model with the seat that flattened into a convenient bed at the touch of a button. The tri-phib, he recalled, in which he'd coaxed Agnes into taking her first ride.

III

THE details of that recollection brought up his spirits again and, he reminded himself, the lesson had sunk in; had developed into his most useful ethic. After his narrow scrape with Jason's quantum analyzer in the Berlin incident, it hadn't taken long for a good, one-man detective agency to locate Phys-Lab Nine's frenetic genius, Moglaut. It had taken longer to discover Moglaut's currency but, after much shadowing, the 'tec had come through handsomely. Lonnie, automatically applying his fully-developed Ethic One, always considered it a nice sentimental touch that the one-man agency's final case was successful.

Moglaut's price was a prim, brunette soprano who wore her eyes disguised behind heavy tortoiseshell. The ill-cut garb she could afford added greatly to her staid appearance, obscuring a certain full-bodied litheness. She earned a throttled existence soloing at funerals and in the worship halls of obscure, rigidly fanatic offshoot sects.

Her consuming passion was to be an opera prima donna.

Lonnie never tried to understand why Moglaut sat fascinated through endless sin-busting sermons and lachrymose requiems. To hurry afterwards, with the jerky motions, the glazed eyes of a zombie, to subsequent rendezvous with the soprano at his suburban apartment. It was entirely sufficient in Lonnie's philosophy that Moglaut did.

The soprano's continuing suburban cooperation was insured by Lonnie's judicious doling out of exactly the cash to keep a tenth-rate opera company barely functioning in a lesser quarter of Government City. Oddly, he found it pleased him and from that grew his wide patronizing of the Arts.

The immediate result of the situation he created and controlled so deftly was Moglaut's production of a closed-plenum grid suit.

None of Gov-Pol, Gov-Mil or Gov-Econ labs found out about it; much less Pol-Anx or Government itself. Moglaut did all the work in the tiny complete lab Lonnie set up in the suburbs.

Lonnie didn't care what electronic witchery took place in the minute spatial interstices between the finely-woven mesh of flexible tantalum. Sufficient for him, the silvery white suit once donned and triple-zipped through hood and glove-endings, he was immune to ordinary Earthly phenomena; free to move about, do what he wished, untraceably. In it, his words were not vulnerable to the sono-beam's eavesdropping. Photo-electric and magneto-photonic watchdogs ignored him. Even the most delicately sensitive thermo-couples continued their dreams of freezing flame undisturbed. Jason's quantum analyzer couldn't pick up the leavings of a glance—all that the suit permitted out into the physical world.

The suit had its limitations, of course. Lonnie could see out, but the suit could also be seen. That required sometimes intricate advance planning to offset. Also, occasionally, manipulating the field of the grid to permit mechanical contact with the physical world was a trifle cumbersome but never annoyingly so. All it took was a modicum of step-by-step thought and some care not to leave a personal trace for the quantum

analyzer to pick up. No actual trouble. And, finally, Moglaut had warned that the compact power unit pocketed on the left breast had a half-life of only thirteen years.

That left Lonnie placid. He took the suit for granted and used it for what it let him do.

When something more was needed, he was convinced his philosophy would provide it.

He didn't waste time trying to determine whether possession of the suit or previous experiences leading to his insistence on its development brought into focus the third ethic of his philosophy: "Rules One and Two are valuable and have their use. But when the chips are really down, *do it yourself!*" Instead, he toddled about personally acquiring the trappings of omnipotent royalty with little thought for the means.

BUT while he was about that business, the very limitations of the grid suit furnished an unending challenge to Moglaut's genius. And out of a sideline experiment incited by that challenge came the disarmer which Jason greeted with such fruitless glee.

Fruitless because, of course, before turning the disarmer over to Lab Nine and Pol-Anx, Moglaut devised a new, infinitely stronger, more versatile power pack for Lonnie's suit. A power pack controlled by a simple rheostat in the palm of the left-hand glove, but whose energy derived from the electron-kinetic properties of pent and shielded tritium. Not simple. In fact, solving the problem of penting and shielding tritium in a portable package delayed the appearance of Jason's disarmer two whole years.

That power pack and the reciprocating properties of the fields of the grid suit itself made a dilly of a combination. Before, the closed-plenum mesh kept Lonnie from leaving traces. Now, anything once embraced within the palpitating fields of the grid moved with and how the suit moved; not in accord with the natural laws of the surrounding continuum. That neat new attribute took care of the cubic yard or so of Diamond Throne.

And the ravenous tritium was malignant. Let any external power be applied against the plenum and it would be smashed, hurled back full force upon its source.

Jason had an undiagnosed example of that when he got only part of his man back from the Valley of Kings.

It was the power-pack-grid-suit combo that made a sleeping buddha of the servo-tracer on the night of Jason's call at Lonnie's mansion; bollixed up the elaborate guarditudes of the Peiping Temple of Mankind; and, when Jason so openly displayed suspicion of the genius, made child's play of what the newspapers headlined as "Scientist's Amazing Suicide Love Pact."

Lonnie grinned, remembering the incident. Then other memories—things he'd witnessed through a tight-beam scanner secreted in the suburban apartment—crowded his mind; stirring him restlessly on the Diamond Throne. Divesting himself of imperial appurtenances, he started for a certain locked file in the den to check the specifications of available per-diem empresses.

Making sure the triptych was snugly in place behind him, he paused to flip the switch on the stereo cube. Maybe Messalina Magdalen or one of the lesser ecdysiasts was presenting the perfection of her techniques over the private channel at the moment, an event he would appreciate.

Instead, the private channel presented, as the cube glowed and cleared, the same red, clawed landscape he'd shown to Jason months before. The disembodied voice of the commentator on Mars—not the lyrical public announcer, but the industrial economist who served the private channel—picked up in mid-word: ". . . early to have much data on the science and material resources this dead civilization possessed, but I recommend that every Corporation in Induscomm Cabal should place a technical party at Mars Equatorial as soon as possible. We shall now key in with the public spacecast. Note the texture and color range of the adornments and artifacts. I venture that these items will prove popular among you who can well afford such rare treasures. However, subtlety in acquiring them is suggested. While common clamor for Public ownership is under control, overt provocation is not recommended. Here is the cut-over . . ."

The scene in the cube flashed and coa-

lesced, dazzling Lonnie's eyes for a moment. He was conscious of the landscape rushing "up"; of gigantic walls and spires rising out of the obscurity of a quarried chasm to tower briefly against the pink haze of the Martian sky, then expand to give the impression of engulfing him before the scanner lens settled under the center of a leaping, vaulted dome.

To Lonnie, the many-acred enclosure meant nothing with its shimmering, stone-lace pillars, its tapestries that flamed with color or traced ghostlike, barely discernible outlines on the walls. Nor did any thought enter his mind of the exactness of the reflected color in the stereo cube. Hands clenched into aching fists, he stood leaning forward; striving by sheer will-power to span the void of space and force the scanner lens closer to the truncated pyramid of steps atop which, on a block of plain black stone, a dessicated mummy sat erect, hands folded in its reedy lap and on its head a blazing, corruscating radiance.

A *Crown!*

IV

DAZEDLY, Lonnie was conscious of the public announcer's rhapsodizing: ". . . Gov-Anth's ethnologists and linguistics experts are making some progress toward deciphering the inscription carved on the plaque. Wait! Here's a note from Gawley Worin. You remember Gawley Worin, our famous leg-man, folks, don't you? Well, here's a note. It . . . Listen to this, folks! Listen! This is the beginning of the first rough translation of the inscription. Listen . . ."

" 'We, Wold, last of the Imperial Family of Wold who exercise our Power from Wold, the Imperial City, throughout Wold, the Planet. We, last of the line of Wold, who alone may wear the Tiara which is Our Power, and our Symbol of Power, and the Symbol of Our Power throughout all the edos of Raii's life-taking light, without fear, facing the fate—' "

Hissing, Lonnie cut the stereo switch. He'd seen enough. Darting across the den, he opened his communico. "Get me Sykes in our Mars unit," he ordered the operator. "Make sure what I say is scrambled. While you're waiting, get through to Denisen at Gov-Forn, then Raikes at Gov-Planet, then Butchwaeu in Gov-Int. And keep this line closed—that means you, too—while I'm talking."

Lonnie—THE Launcelot Raichi—was going after what he wanted.

Just under a mile away, Jason turned from the public stereo in the rotunda of Pol-Anx. Tapping the cold bit of his pipe against his teeth as he walked he sought the ease of his chair. In the privacy of his office he began to ponder.

The months' developments gave him no surprise. Because it was the first contact Humanity had had with a non-human race, the Mars discoveries made an overwhelming impression on the man in the street. The result was that for the first time in Post-Synthesis history all artifacts were reserved for Earth Public! ! !

Everyone Who Mattered screamed, except Lonnie. He evinced a biding calmness while attending the ceremonies marking the installation of the Tiara of Wold in the exact center of Government's own Fane of Artifacts; even smiling benignly on certain Gov-Ficials who seemed to perspire more than the coolness of the evening warranted.

Jason, loitering on the grass of Gov-Park, noted the smile and the perspiration. The perspirers reminded him of small boys expecting a whipping.

Once the dedication ceremonies were over, Lonnie never returned to the Fane to examine the Tiara.

It was Jason the Tiara seemed to fascinate. He spent more and more time, particularly evenings, crouching on the bench in Gov-Park across from the Tiara, ignoring the constant stream of awed tourists silhouetted against the blaze of light. He kept in constant touch with his desk sergeant through his pocket communico, so Annex business didn't suffer. And the summer was warm, to say the least, so that several Gov-Ficials were almost regretful that the dignity of their positions forbade following Jason's example.

But then, too, no mere cop had their responsibilities.

None of them was conscious of how habitually Jason frowned, scratched his head, moved uneasily on the pleasant bench. Occasionally, he would snap his fingers and

the frown would relax. He'd switch on the communico and speak briefly. Immediately thereafter, one or the other of the hand-picked four in Jason's personal squad would raise his eyebrows slightly—safely, since the pocket communico did not project video—and take up a new position or new duties. Or, an equipment unit in Op-room at Anx would be indifferently retuned by heedless techs.

Then for a while Jason would vent smoke pleasantly from his malodorous pipe until the frown would settle back between his eyebrows and he'd begin to squirm on the bench again, glancing warily at Executive Level, feeling helpless about the inadequacy of his resources.

But Lonnie had gotten over feeling sad about *his* resources months earlier.

The night he'd returned from the Tiara ceremonies he'd locked himself in his den and let the on-view smile his face was wearing lapse. He tweaked Genghis Khan's nose viciously and slammed himself down in the Diamond Throne without donning a single imperial trapping, pounding his first on the cool mineral facet and staring morosely at the grid suit hanging in its place on the wall.

The grid suit wouldn't help him this time. The cover-alls that had everything except the necessary invisibility to—

Invisibility!

Slowly, Lonnie began to grin. Very little later he had an obscure biochemist hooked, and ended his instructions with: ". . . don't care if it needs concentrated essence of chameleon juice. Invent it. And it better work for there's going to be a total shortage of neo-hyperacth at two-twenty-eight per cc for wifey!"

The biochemist delivered. Lonnie didn't stop to question if it really was essence of chameleon juice. He hurried with the beaker of viscous fluid to his throne room, drenched every square centimeter of the grid suit with it and watched breathlessly through the hours while it dried.

In the glowing, shadowless illumination, the suit gradually disappeared. First, the wall against which it hung shone mistily through it. Then there was wall, slightly outlined by a greyish cast. And at last, only an indescribable fuzziness that had to be sensed rather than seen.

V

HE TOOK the fuzziness off its hanger and threw it up in the air toward the center light. The light was undimmed. The fuzziness was air. It sprawled down across the Throne and became diamond, except for the sleeve that dangled; part air, part intricately patterned Persian carpet. It wasn't a fuzziness, exactly, it was more of a faint tone of difference in the color-texture feel. It was as though what was behind the suit was miraculously translated to its facing surface and then reflected to the eye within the nth of utter fidelity.

Grinning, slowly Lonnie's lower lip crept out and up to squeeze its mate. Then, because it was always better to be sure, he donned the suit to try it against a variety of experimental backgrounds, indoors and out.

Over at Pol-Anx, the servo-tracer went to sleep; the desk sergeant yanked the creaking joints of his bunioned feet down off Jason's desk; on the bench in Gov-Park, Jason's communico squeaked briefly and Jason and his four men rose to emergency alert.

Two hours later, the Wold Tiara still corruscating in the Fane's blaze of light, the servo-tracer picked up its placid humming. Jason's communico squeaked again and Jason's men relaxed while Jason himself clutched his head with both hands and whispered bitter things.

At the same time, Lonnie, whistling cheerfully, drew his legs out of the suit, shook it straight and hung it back on the wall. He was sure now. As sure as he was that the little biochemist and his wife and quintet of daughters would not want for neo-hyperacth or anything else any longer. He giggled a little, thinking of Jason crouched on the bench, glaring vacantly, utterly unconscious of Lonnie passing across the grass so close beside him.

At his own convenience, Lonnie selected his night; a full-moon night because his now-invisible grid suit didn't require dark. He picked a fairly early hour, too, because what matter if a few yawps gawked as the Tiara vanished? And that one of those yawps would be Jason, stodgily on his bench, gave Lonnie an extra fillip. Perhaps

it was just for this he'd let Jason plug along on a cold trail all these years.

So that night, wearily from his bench in Gov-Park, Jason looked up at Friday the 13th's full moon swimming amiably through its own reflected night-brightness. His brain, tired of its everlasting shuttle between worries, presented him with a disconnected memory-fact: "As cited by Zollner," Jason found himself quoting a forgotten textbook, "the Moon's reflectivity is point one seven four . . . Nuts!" Angrily, he broke off, thumbed the button of his communico, growled into the microphone on his lapel, "Report."

"Adams," came promptly back. "West Entry. Nothing."

"McGillis. Patrolling rear wall. All clear in both directions as far as I can see. An' I can see both ends of the Fane in all this moonlight, Chief."

"Holland. At Raichi House. Nothing."

"Johnson. East Entry. More of the same." Then, "Say, Jase, how about it? These double shifts are getting me."

"What's the matter with you, now?"

"My feet hurt, Jase. Neither one of us is as young as we used to be, remember. How about knocking off?"

"Hmphf . . ." Johnson, Jason thought, was getting old. He'd been a good man in his day but— Hey, he was still a good man! It was Jason's own stubbornness that was wearing Johnson down. Jason's useless stubbornness. After all, without the backing of Anx or Gov, without results from the equipment he had filched to use on Lonnie, what was the use of everlastingly sticking around the Tiara like a fly buzzing molasso-saccharine anyway? Jason opened his mouth to send them all home, pressed the communico button and—shelved the relieving order temporarily. Instead, he blasted into the microphone: "Sergeant! SERGEANT!"

From the communico, an intermittent drone became a gasping gulp; changed into a violent yawn and only then turned into startled speech. "Yeah? Huh? . . . Yeah, Chief!"

"Sergeant, if I ever catch you asleep again, you won't ever get your pension."

"Chief, I wasn't asleep! Honest! I—"

"All right. What's happening up there?"

"Nothin' . . . nothin' . . . I wasn't asleep, Chief. I'd'a called you 'f anything—"

SOMETHING bright, or was it dull, plucked at the edge of Jason's vision. Inside the Fane, far down at one end. A thin, vertical bar of difference in the blaze of light. Chin half turned, Jason stared. What? . . .

"*Chief!* That tracer's asleep—I mean—that there tracer's just GONE t'sleep! I mean—Chief! It's—"

"Shut up!" Jason hissed. "Holland! If you've let anyone slip past you out of that house—"

"Nobody did. You know me better than that, Chief."

"Adams! McGillis! Johnson! What's happening?"

"Nothing . . . Not a thing . . ."

"*Johnson!*" Jason licked suddenly dry lips. "Dammit, Johnson, report! . . . *Johnson!*"

Silence.

Grimly, Jason watched the vertical bar of different brightness edge back to the Fane's East wall and disappear into the even dazzle of the marble. He had a feeling it wasn't any use calling Johnson again. Ever.

"Chief, what's up? What do we do?"

"Huh? Oh . . . You, Holland, get over to the East Entry as fast as your legs'll stretch."

"There in three minutes flat!"

"You, too, McGillis."

"On my way!"

"Adams, you stick at that West Entry. If anything gets past you, I'll—"

"Don't worry, Chief. I've got Johnson to even up for."

Not watching how he ran, Jason hurled himself toward the East Entry; his eyes following, in the opposite direction, a dullness moving in the blaze inside the Fane. A smoothly moving, white on white, unfaced ghost of whiteness within, a part of, the blazing radionic light. Just as he rounded the East end of the Fane, he glimpsed the vertical bar of whiteness again —the edge of the marble slab that was the entry door, reflecting the blazing light at a different angle. Behind it, McGillis's tightly grinning face. Under McGillis's face, the stab of blue-white light reflected a glancing ray from the old-fashioned solid-missile service pistol that Jason had insisted all four men arm themselves with for this assignment.

Over the sound of his own labored breathing as he plunged through the East Entry, Jason heard panting behind him. Holland. Holland bettering his promised three minutes—and with a forbidden disarmer in his hand. Guiltily, Jason felt the weight of the disarmer he had himself secreted under his armpit.

Then there wasn't time for thinking or feeling, only for running down the dazzling half-mile inside the Fane to the Tiara. Up ahead, the different-white shape was motionless in front of it. Oddly, a dark, vertical line appeared from the top to what would be the waist of the shape. And for the instant it took the Tiara to vanish inside, Jason saw clearly in the radiant light the profile of Lonnie's unmistakable face. Saw Lonnie's eyes swivel in the direction of the thundering echoes of their footfalls in the silence of the Fane. Saw Lonnie turn toward them, the dark line disappearing from waist to top as if it had never been.

Once more the different-whiteness moved. Toward them. Edging for the back wall to skirt around them; one limb-shape fumbling in the palm of the other.

"No you don't!" McGillis, ahead of Jason, yelled, his howl drowned in the smacking crack of his pistol.

There seemed to be a waver in the different-whiteness. A small black dot appeared against it; hung briefly, apparently unsupported, in the air; then the undistorted bullet dropped inertly to the floor.

"You *still* won't!" McGillis hurled himself, shoulders low and legs driving, at the shape. Two feet from it, he rebounded sharply, trod on the rolling bullet, went down, his head splatting dully against the marble floor.

Holland grunted. Crouched to leap. Thrust his disarmer high, ready to snap into line.

"Hold it!" Jason commanded. Silently, eyelids barely separated to endure the dazzle, he stared at the different-whiteness that confronted him. "I made it this time, Lonnie," he called. "Caught up with you—No!" His arm flung out, startling him with the feel of his disarmer now oddly in his hand.

"Don't move!"

The white-within-white's limb-shapes moved up, the hand-ends one over the other. Through the minute spaces the overlapping fingers left, glimpses of a thin dark line appeared. The hood was open a trifle at mouth level, and from the opening Lonnie's voice emerged, sifting through the protecting screen of gloves. "You can't see me! You *can't!*"

"No? Take one step sideways. Just *one!* Stop!"

The different-whiteness had moved, and Holland had moved with it; crouching now, alertly motionless, in his new position. Jason changed the angle of his own facing. "Now do you think we can't see you?"

"But . . . but how!"

"You're albedo is showing," Jason chuckled harshly. "You never would take the trouble to learn the *how* of anything, Lonnie. Sure, your damned disguise is the same color as the marble. Maybe even exactly the same. But the material is different, and the surface texture; it doesn't have the same degree or quality of reflectivity to incident light that marble does!

"Eighty years ago, even the commercial photographers knew about albedo—one of 'em made a picture of a cat, white on white. I told you about the reflectivity in your stereo cube. But you wouldn't listen, Lonnie, would you?" Jason let out a bursting peal of laughter. *"So you tripped over your own albedo!"*

Through the dying echoes of his own laughter, Jason caught Lonnie's harsh whisper. "You haven't got me, copper!"

THE black line marking the opening in the grid suit disappeared. The barely-discernible lime-shapes dropped, one hand-end again fumbling at the rheostat in the palm of the other.

"I'll get him, Chief!" Holland was in action, his disarmer snapping down into aim.

"No!" Jason roared. "Holland, don't!"

Too late. Under the pressure of Holland's finger, the disarmer's invisible ion-stream tightened to the thread-thin lethal intensity, leaped out against the suit's grid. Then the disarmer was luminous even in the dazzle; even through the flesh of Holland's fist. Holland screamed and squirmed and dropped. Part of him—the part that wasn't burned away—reached the floor.

The stench of carbonized flesh scoured Jason's nostrils. Stupidly, he stared down at the headless, shoulderless, armless torso; black . . . sooty . . . against the snowy gleam of the floor; conscious of the sidelong, round-about approach of the different-white figure. He'd failed again. Lonnie, in that damned suit, was impervious.

Slowly, he raised his eyes from the thing on the floor to the thing approaching. One consolation, he himself wouldn't go on living after this. With grim frustration, he raised his arm in a final, fruitless gesture and hurled the useless disarmer at the shape of Lonnie.

It halted, dead, in mid-air, a yard away from the shape-thing. Dropped straight down, clanging against the floor.

A quiver as of mirth appeared to shake the different-whiteness. It stooped. One hand-end fumbled at the palmed rheostat, then dropped to pick up the disarmer. Fumbled again at the rheostat while the figure straightened up to point the glistening projector at Jason's belly.

The dark opening in the hood appeared again.

Lonnie's voice chortled, "Told you I'd use whatever you tried to smear you with. Goodbye, Jasey . . ."

The dark line was gone. The disarmer, turned to lethal potential, settled in the shape's hand-end and began to spout. Jason went stiff. Every muscle of his body clenching to withstand obliteration.

He waited for it. Tight . . . except his eyes that, in spite of themselves, opened.

Caught within the field, the full power of the disarmer poured itself into the suit. The suit's capacity absorbed it. Almost. Then turned the combined energies on itself.

With the smell of frying organic matter, slowly the grid-coveralls appeared in dazzling radiance within the dazzle of the Fane's lights; glowed in it; red—then white—hot. Whiter than the light itself—far, far lighter than any reflected rays could make it.

Inside the all-encompassing, roasting grid of the melting suit, Lonnie writhed. Faintly, as the suit failed, his screams came through —momentarily. Then they were gone as the fused, molten heap subsided lower . . . lower . . . began to trickle across the dazzling, ice-white marble of the floor.

Afterward, had Jason known anything at all about Lonnie's Philosophy, he'd have immediately supplied another "rule"; making a foursome out of the "Triple Ethic": "If you do it yourself, make sure you know *what* you're doing."

$100.00 A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU



FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

JUST LOOK
The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* accident, and for *all* common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES



MATERNITY

Benefits At Small Extra Cost
Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.



POLIO

Benefits At No Extra Cost
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to $500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
For Orthopedic Appliances, up to . . . $500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

3¢ A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This Is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON
The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company
Hospital Department S-86 Omaha 2, Nebraska

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....

Address.....

City or Town.....*State*.....

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951
Hospital Department S-86, Omaha 2, Nebraska


1952 POLIO PRECAUTIONS
DON'T
GET CHILLED
DON'T
GET OVERTIRED
IF POLIO COMES
Karen Blocha, 5, enacts polio pointers advised by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, which also cautions against mouth and throat operations when polio is around. If polio does strike, your local March of Dimes chapter will assist all those needing aid.
DON'T
MIX WITH
NEW GROUPS
BUT DO
KEEP CLEAN
RECOMMENDED BY THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR INFANTILE PARALYSIS

THE GUN

By PHILIP K. DICK

Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent, dead. Only the gun showed signs of life . . . and the trespassers had wrecked that for all time. The return journey to pick up the treasure would be a cinch . . . they smiled.

THE Captain peered into the eyepiece of the telescope. He adjusted the focus quickly.

"It was an atomic fission we saw, all right," he said presently. He sighed and pushed the eyepiece away. "Any of you who wants to look may do so. But it's not a pretty sight."

"Let me look," Tance the archeologist said. He bent down to look, squinting. "Good Lord!" He leaped violently back, knocking against Dorle, the Chief Navigator.

"Why did we come all this way, then?" Dorle asked, looking around at the other men. "There's no point even in landing. Let's go back at once."

"Perhaps he's right," the biologist murmured. "But I'd like to look for myself, if I may." He pushed past Tance and peered into the sight.

He saw a vast expanse, an endless surface of gray, stretching to the edge of the planet. At first he thought it was water but after a moment he realized that it was slag, pitted, fused slag, broken only by hills of rock jutting up at intervals. Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent, dead.

"I see," Fomar said, backing away from the eyepiece. "Well, I won't find any legumes there." He tried to smile, but his lips stayed unmoved. He stepped away and stood by himself, staring past the others.

"I wonder what the atmospheric sample will show," Tance said.

"I think I can guess," the Captain answered. "Most of the atmosphere is poisoned. But didn't we expect all this? I don't see why we're so surprised. A fission visible as far away as our system must be a terrible thing."

He strode off down the corridor, dignified and expressionless. They watched him disappear into the control room.

As the Captain closed the door the young woman turned. "What did the telescope show? Good or bad?"

"Bad. No life could possibly exist. Atmosphere poisoned, water vaporized, all the land fused."

"Could they have gone underground?"

The Captain slid back the port window so that the surface of the planet under them was visible. The two of them stared down, silent and disturbed. Mile after mile of unbroken ruin stretched out, blackened slag, pitted and scarred, and occasional heaps of rock.

Suddenly Nasha jumped. "Look! Over there, at the edge. Do you see it?"

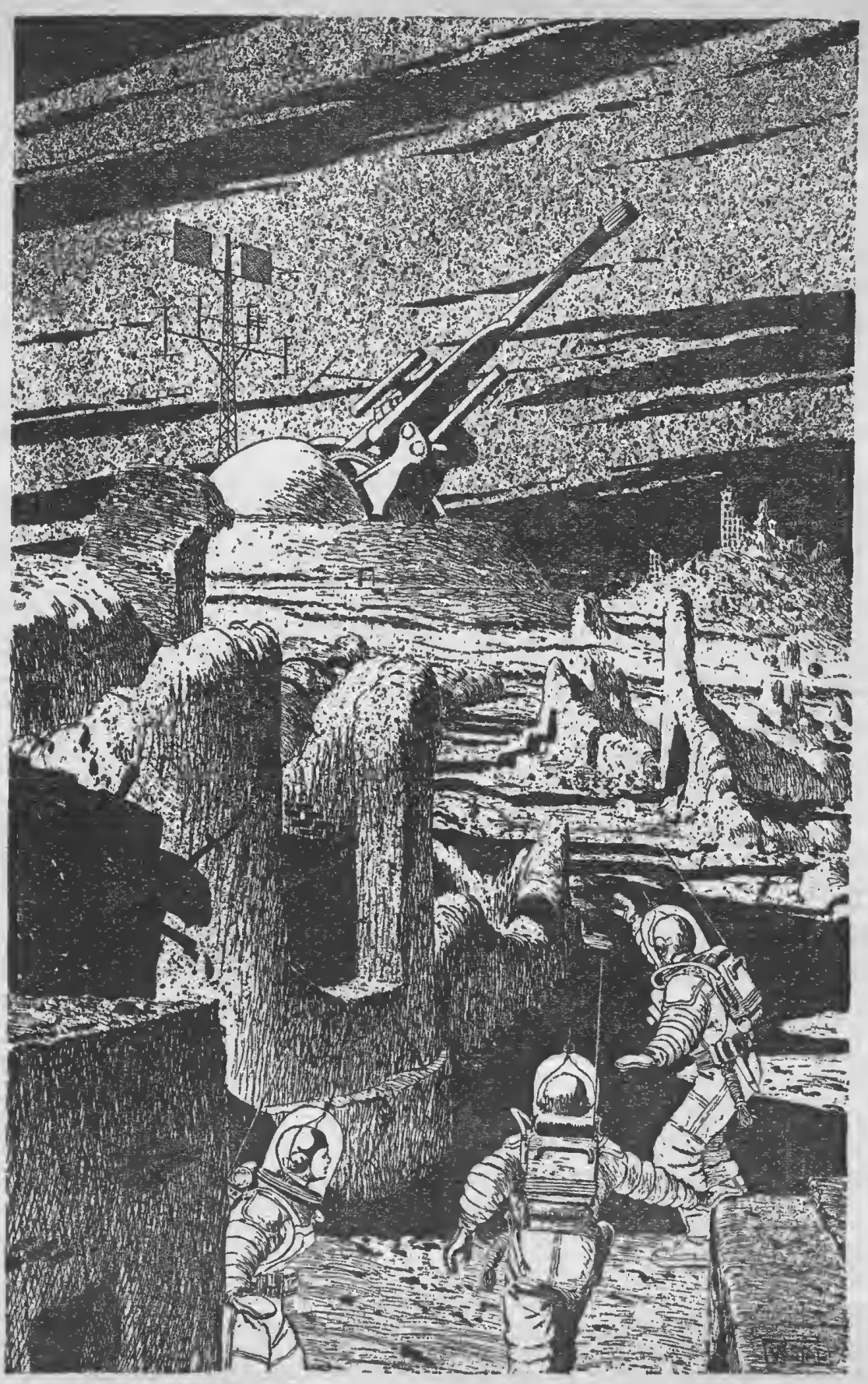
They stared. Something rose up, not rock, not an accidental formation. It was round, a circle of dots, white pellets on the dead skin of the planet. A city? Buildings of some kind?

"Please turn the ship," Nasha said excitedly. She pushed her dark hair from her face. "Turn the ship and let's see what it is!"

The ship turned, changing its course. As they came over the white dots the Captain lowered the ship, dropping it down as much as he dared. "Piers," he said. "Piers of some sort of stone. Perhaps poured artificial stone. The remains of a city."

"Oh, dear," Nasha murmured. "How awful." She watched the ruins disappear behind them. In a half-circle the white squares jutted from the slag, chipped and cracked, like broken teeth.

"There's nothing alive," the Captain said at last. "I think we'll go right back; I know



most of the crew want to. Get the Government Receiving Station on the sender and tell them what we found, and that we—"

HE STAGGERED.

The first atomic shell had struck the ship, spinning it around. The Captain fell to the floor, crashing into the control table. Papers and instruments rained down on him. As he started to his feet the second shell struck. The ceiling cracked open, struts and girders twisted and bent. The ship shuddered, falling suddenly down, then righting itself as automatic controls took over.

The Captain lay on the floor by the smashed control board. In the corner Nasha struggled to free herself from the debris.

Outside the men were already sealing the gaping leaks in the side of the ship, through which the precious air was rushing, dissipating into the void beyond. "Help me!" Dorle was shouting. "Fire over here, wiring ignited." Two men came running. Tance watched helplessly, his eyeglasses broken and bent.

"So there is life here, after all," he said, half to himself. "But how could—"

"Give us a hand," Fomar said, hurrying past. "Give us a hand, we've got to land the ship!"

It was night. A few stars glinted above them, winking through the drifting silt that blew across the surface of the planet.

Dorle peered out, frowning. "What a place to be stuck in." He resumed his work, hammering the bent metal hull of the ship back into place. He was wearing a pressure suit; there were still many small, leaks, and radioactive particles from the atmosphere had already found their way into the ship.

Nasha and Fomar were sitting at the table in the control room, pale and solemn, studying the inventory lists.

"Low on carbohydrates," Fomar said. "We can break down the stored fats if we want to, but—"

"I wonder if we could find anything outside." Nasha went to the window. "How uninviting it looks." She paced back and forth, very slender and small, her face dark with fatigue. "What do you suppose an exploring party would find?"

Fomar shrugged. "Not much. Maybe a few weeds growing in cracks here and there. Nothing we could use. Anything that would adapt to this environment would be toxic, lethal."

Nasha paused, rubbing her cheek. There was a deep scratch there, still red and swollen. "Then how do you explain—*it?* According to your theory the inhabitants must have died in their skins, fried like yams. But who fired on us? Somebody detected us, made a decision, aimed a gun."

"And gauged distance," the Captain said feebly from the cot in the corner. He turned toward them. "That's the part that worries me. The first shell put us out of commission, the second almost destroyed us. They were well aimed, perfectly aimed. We're not such an easy target."

"True." Fomar nodded. "Well, perhaps we'll know the answer before we leave here. What a strange situation! All our reasoning tells us that no life could exist; the whole planet burned dry, the atmosphere itself gone, completely poisoned."

"The gun that fired the projectiles survived," Nasha said. "Why not people?"

"It's not the same. Metal doesn't need air to breathe. Metal doesn't get leukemia from radioactive particles. Metal doesn't need food and water."

There was silence.

"A paradox," Nasha said. "Anyhow, in the morning I think we should send out a search party. And meanwhile we should keep on trying to get the ship in condition for the trip back."

"It'll be days before we can take off," Fomar said. "We should keep every man working here. We can't afford to send out a party."

Nasha smiled a little. "We'll send you in the first party. Maybe you can discover—what was it you were so interested in?"

"Legumes. Edible legumes."

"Maybe you can find some of them. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Only watch out. They fired on us once without even knowing who we were or what we came for. Do you suppose that they fought with each other? Perhaps they couldn't imagine anyone being friendly, under any circumstances. What a strange evolutionary trait, inter-species warfare. Fighting within the race!"

"We'll know in the morning," Fomar said. "Let's get some sleep."

THE sun came up chill and austere. The three people, two men and a woman, stepped through the port, dropping down on the hard ground below.

"What a day," Dorle said grumpily. "I said how glad I'd be to walk on firm ground again, but—"

"Come on," Nasha said. "Up beside me. I want to say something to you. Will you excuse us, Tance?"

Tance nodded gloomily. Dorle caught up with Nasha. They walked together, their metal shoes crunching the ground underfoot. Nasha glanced at him.

"Listen. The Captain is dying. No one knows except the two of us. By the end of the day-period of this planet he'll be dead. The shock did something to his heart. He was almost sixty, you know."

Dorle nodded. "That's bad. I have a great deal of respect for him. You will be captain in his place, of course. Since you're vice-captain now—"

"No. I prefer to see someone else lead, perhaps you or Fomar. I've been thinking over the situation and it seems to me that I should declare myself mated to one of you, whichever of you wants to be captain. Then I could devolve the responsibility."

"Well, I don't want to be captain. Let Fomar do it."

Nasha studied him, tall and blond, striding along beside her in his pressure suit. "I'm rather partial to you," she said. "We might try it for a time, at least. But do as you like. Look, we're coming to something."

They stopped walking, letting Tance catch up. In front of them was some sort of a ruined building. Dorle stared around thoughtfully.

"Do you see? This whole place is a natural bowl, a huge valley. See how the rock formations rise up on all sides, protecting the floor. Maybe some of the great blast was deflected here."

They wandered around the ruins, picking up rocks and fragments. "I think this was a farm," Tance said, examining a piece of wood. "This was part of a tower windmill."

"Really?" Nasha took the stick and turned it over. "Interesting. But let's go; we don't have much time."

"Look," Dorle said suddenly. "Off there, a long way off. Isn't that something?" He pointed.

Nasha sucked in her breath. "The white stones."

"What?"

Nasha looked up at Dorle. "The white stones, the great broken teeth. We saw them, the Captain and I, from the control room." She touched Dorle's arm gently. "That's where they fired from. I didn't think we had landed so close."

"What is it?" Tance said, coming up to them. "I'm almost blind without my glasses. What do you see?"

"The city. Where they fired from."

"Oh." All three of them stood together. "Well, let's go," Tance said. "There's no telling what we'll find there." Dorle frowned at him.

"Wait. We don't know what we would be getting into. They must have patrols. They probably have seen us already, for that matter."

"They probably have seen the ship itself," Tance said. "They probably know right now where they can find it, where they can blow it up. So what difference does it make whether we go closer or not?"

"That's true," Nasha said. "If they really want to get us we haven't a chance. We have no armaments at all; you know that."

"I have a hand weapon." Dorle nodded. "Well, let's go on, then. I suppose you're right, Tance."

"But let's stay together," Tance said nervously. "Nasha, you're going too fast."

Nasha looked back. She laughed. "If we expect to get there by nightfall we must go fast."

THEY reached the outskirts of the city at about the middle of the afternoon. The sun, cold and yellow, hung above them in the colorless sky. Dorle stopped at the top of a ridge overlooking the city.

"Well, there it is. What's left of it."

There was not much left. The huge concrete piers which they had noticed were not piers at all, but the ruined foundations of buildings. They had been baked by the searing heat, baked and charred almost to the ground. Nothing else remained, only this irregular circle of white squares, perhaps four miles in diameter.

Dorle spat in disgust. "More wasted time.

A dead skeleton of a city, that's all."

"But it was from here that the firing came," Tance murmured. "Don't forget that."

"And by someone with a good eye and a great deal of experience," Nasha added. "Let's go."

They walked into the city between the ruined buildings. No one spoke. They walked in silence, listening to the echo of their footsteps.

"It's macabre," Dorle muttered. "I've seen ruined cities before but they died of old age, old age and fatigue. This was killed, seared to death. This city didn't die —it was murdered."

"I wonder what the city was called," Nasha said. She turned aside, going up the remains of a stairway from one of the foundations. "Do you think we might find a signpost? Some kind of plaque?"

She peered into the ruins.

"There's nothing there," Dorle said impatiently. "Come on."

"Wait." Nasha bent down, touching a concrete stone. "There's something inscribed on this."

"What is it?" Tance hurried up. He squatted in the dust, running his gloved fingers over the surface of the stone. "Letters, all right." He took a writing stick from the pocket of his pressure suit and copied the inscription on a bit of paper. Dorle glanced over his shoulder. The inscription was:

FRANKLIN APARTMENTS

"That's this city," Nasha said softly. "That was its name."

Tance put the paper in his pocket and they went on. After a time Dorle said,

"Nasha, you know, I think we're being watched. But don't look around."

The woman stiffened. "Oh? Why do you say that? Did you see something?"

"No. I can feel it, though. Don't you?"

Nasha smiled a little. "I feel nothing, but perhaps I'm more used to being stared at." She turned her head slightly. "Oh!"

Dorle reached for his hand weapon. "What is it? What do you see?" Tance had stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth half open.

"The gun," Nasha said. "It's the gun."

"Look at the size of it. The size of the thing." Dorle unfastened his hand weapon slowly. "That's it, all right."

The gun was huge. Stark and immense it pointed up at the sky, a mass of steel and glass, set in a huge slab of concrete. Even as they watched the gun moved on its swivel base, whirring underneath. A slim vane turned with the wind, a network of rods atop a high pole.

"It's alive," Nasha whispered. "It's listening to us, watching us."

The gun moved again, this time clockwise. It was mounted so that it could make a full circle. The barrel lowered a trifle, then resumed its original position.

"But who fires it?" Tance said.

Dorle laughed. "No one. No one fires it."

They stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"It fires itself."

They couldn't believe him. Nasha came close to him, frowning, looking up at him. "I don't understand. What do you mean, it fires itself?"

"Watch, I'll show you. Don't move." Dorle picked up a rock from the ground. He hesitated a moment and then tossed the rock high in the air. The rock passed in front of the gun. Instantly the great barrel moved, the vanes contracted.

THE rock fell to the ground. The gun paused, then resumed its calm swivel, its slow circling.

"You see," Dorle said, "it noticed the rock, as soon as I threw it up in the air. It's alert to anything that flies or moves above the ground level. Probably it detected us as soon as we entered the gravitational field of the planet. It probably had a bead on us from the start. We don't have a chance. It knows all about the ship. It's just waiting for us to take off again."

"I understand about the rock," Nasha said, nodding. "The gun noticed it, but not us, since we're on the ground, not above. It's only designed to combat objects in the sky. The ship is safe until it takes off again, then the end will come."

"But what's this gun for?" Tance put in. "There's no one alive here. Everyone is dead."

"It's a machine," Dorle said. "A machine that was made to do a job. And it's doing

the job. How it survived the blast I don't know. On it goes, waiting for the enemy. Probably they came by air in some sort of projectiles."

"The enemy," Nasha said. "Their own race. It is hard to believe that they really bombed themselves, fired at themselves."

"Well, it's over with. Except right here, where we're standing. This one gun, still alert, ready to kill. It'll go on until it wears out."

And by that time we'll be dead," Nasha said bitterly.

"There must have been hundreds of guns like this," Dorle murmured. "They must have been used to the sight, guns, weapons, uniforms. Probably they accepted it as a natural thing, part of their lives, like eating and sleeping. An institution, like the church and the state. Men trained to fight, to lead armies, a regular profession. Honored, respected."

Tance was walking slowly toward the gun, peering nearsightedly up at it. "Quite complex, isn't it? All those vanes and tubes. I suppose this is some sort of a telescopic sight." His gloved hand touched the end of a long tube.

Instantly the gun shifted, the barrel retracting. It swung—

"Don't move!" Dorle cried. The barrel swung past them as they stood, rigid and still. For one terrible moment it hesitated over their heads, clicking and whirring, settling into position. Then the sounds died out and the gun became silent.

Tance smiled foolishly inside his helmet. "I must have put my finger over the lens. I'll be more careful." He made his way up onto the circular slab, stepping gingerly behind the body of the gun. He disappeared from view.

"Where did he go?" Nasha said irritably. "He'll get us all killed."

"Tance, come back!" Dorle shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

"In a minute." There was a long silence. At last the archeologist appeared. "I think I've found something. Come up and I'll show you."

"What is it?"

"Dorle, you said the gun was here to keep the enemy off. I think I know why they wanted to keep the enemy off."

They were puzzled.

"I think I've found what the gun is supposed to guard. Come and give me a hand."

"All right," Dorle said abruptly. "Let's go." He seized Nasha's hand. "Come on. Let's see what he's found. I thought something like this might happen when I saw that the gun was—"

"Like what?" Nasha pulled her hand away. "What are you talking about? You act as if you knew what he's found."

"I do." Dorle smiled down at her. "Do you remember the legend that all races have, the myth of the buried treasure, and the dragon, the serpent that watches it, guards it, keeping everyone away?"

She nodded. "Well?"

Dorle pointed up at the gun.

"That," he said, "is the dragon. Come on."

BETWEEN the three of them they managed to pull up the steel cover and lay it to one side. Dorle was wet with perspiration when they finished.

"It isn't worth it," he grunted. He stared into the dark yawning hole. "Or is it?"

Nasha clicked on her hand lamp, shining the beam down the stairs. The steps were thick with dust and rubble. At the bottom was a steel door.

"Come on," Tance said excitedly. He started down the stairs. They watched him reach the door and pull hopefully on it without success. "Give a hand!"

"All right." They came gingerly after him. Dorle examined the door. It was bolted shut, locked. There was an inscription on the door but he could not read it.

"Now what?" Nasha said.

Dorle took out his hand weapon. "Stand back. I can't think of any other way," He pressed the switch. The bottom of the door glowed red. Presently it began to crumble. Dorle clicked the weapon off. "I think we can get through. Let's try."

The door came apart easily. In a few minutes they had carried it away in pieces and stacked the pieces on the first step. Then they went on, flashing the light ahead of them.

They were in a vault. Dust lay everywhere, on everything, inches thick. Wood crates lined the walls, huge boxes and crates, packages and containers. Tance looked around curiously, his eyes bright.

"What exactly are all these?" he murmured. "Something valuable, I would think." He picked up a round drum and opened it. A spool fell to the floor, unwinding a black ribbon. He examined it, holding it up to the light.

"Look at this!"

They came around him. "Pictures," Nasha said. "Tiny pictures."

"Records of some kind." Tance closed the spool up in the drum again. "Look, hundreds of drums." He flashed the light around. "And those crates. Let's open one."

Dorle was already prying at the wood. The wood had turned brittle and dry. He managed to pull a section away.

It was a picture. A boy in a blue garment, smiling pleasantly, staring ahead, young and handsome. He seemed almost alive, ready to move toward them in the light of the hand lamp. It was one of them, one of the ruined race, the race that had perished.

For a long time they stared at the picture. At last Dorle replaced the board.

"All these other crates," Nasha said. "More pictures. And these drums. What are in the boxes?"

"This is their treasure," Tance said, almost to himself. "Here are their pictures, their records. Probably all their literature is here, their stories, their myths, their ideas about the universe."

"And their history," Nasha said. "We'll be able to trace their development and find out what it was that made them become what they were."

Dorle was wandering around the vault. "Odd," he murmured. "Even at the end, even after they had begun to fight they still knew, someplace down inside them, that their real treasure was this, their books and pictures, their myths. Even after their big cities and buildings and industries were destroyed they probably hoped to come back and find this. After everything else was gone."

"When we get back home we can agitate for a mission to come here," Tance said. "All this can be loaded up and taken back. We'll be leaving about—"

He stopped.

"Yes," Dorle said dryly. "We'll be leaving about three day-periods from now. We'll fix the ship, then take off. Soon we'll be home, that is, if nothing happens. Like being shot down by that—"

"Oh, stop it " Nasha said impatiently. "Leave him alone. He's right: all this must be taken back home, sooner or later. We'll have to solve the problem of the gun. We have no choice."

Dorle nodded. "What's your solution, then? As soon as we leave the ground we'll be shot down." His face twisted bitterly. "They've guarded their treasure too well. Instead of being preserved it will lie here until it rots. It serves them right."

"How?"

"Don't you see? This was the only way they knew, building a gun and setting it up to shoot anything that came along. They were so certain that everything was hostile, the enemy, coming to take their possessions away from them. Well, they can keep them."

Nasha was deep in thought, her mind far away. Suddenly she gasped. "Dorle," she said. "What's the matter with us? We have no problem. The gun is no menace at all."

The two men stared at her.

"No menace?" Dorle said. "It's already shot us down once. And as soon as we take off again—"

"Don't you see?" Nasha began to laugh. "The poor foolish gun, it's completely harmless. Even I could deal with it alone."

"You?"

Her eyes were flashing. "With a crowbar. With a hammer or a stick of wood. Let's go back to the ship and load up. Of course we're at its mercy in the air: that's the way it was made. It can fire into the sky, shoot down anything that flies. But that's all! Against something on the ground it has no defenses. Isn't that right?"

Dorle nodded slowly. "The soft underbelly of the dragon. In the legend, the dragon's armor doesn't cover its stomach." He began to laugh. "That's right. That's perfectly right."

"Let's go, then," Nasha said. "Let's get back to the ship. We have work to do here."

IT WAS early the next morning when they reached the ship. During the night the Captain had died, and the crew had ignited his body, according to custom. They had stood solemnly around it until the last ember died. As they were going back to

their work the woman and the two men appeared, dirty and tired, still excited.

And presently, from the ship, a line of people came, each carrying something in his hands. The line marched across the gray slag, the eternal expanse of fused metal. When they reached the weapon they all fell on the gun at once, with crowbars, hammers, anything that was heavy and hard.

The telescopic sights shattered into bits. The wiring was pulled out, torn to shreds. The delicate gears were smashed, dented.

Finally the warheads themselves were carried off and the firing pins removed.

The gun was smashed, the great weapon destroyed. The people went down into the vault and examined the treasure. With its metal-armored guardian dead there was no danger any longer. They studied the pictures, the films, the crates of books, the jeweled crowns, the cups, the statues.

At last, as the sun was dipping into the gray mists that drifted across the planet they came back up the stairs again. For a moment they stood around the wrecked gun looking at the unmoving outline of it.

Then they started back to the ship. There was still much work to be done. The ship had been badly hurt, much had been damaged and lost. The important thing was to repair it as quickly as possible, to get it into the air.

With all of them working together it took just five more days to make it space worthy.

NASHA stood in the control room, watching the planet fall away behind them. She folded her arms, sitting down on the edge of the table.

"What are you thinking?" Dorle said.

"I? Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I was thinking that there must have been a time when this planet was quite different, when there was life on it."

"I suppose there was. It's unfortunate that no ships from our system came this far, but then we had no reason to suspect intelligent life until we saw the fission glow in the sky."

"And then it was too late."

"Not quite too late. After all, their possessions, their music, books, their pictures, all of that will survive. We'll take them home and study them, and they'll change us. We won't be the same afterwards. Their sculpturing, especially. Did you see the one of the great winged creature, without a head or arms? Broken off, I suppose. But those wings— It looked very old. It will change us a great deal."

"When we come back we won't find the gun waiting for us," Nasha said. "Next time it won't be there to shoot us down. We can land and take the treasure, as you call it." She smiled up at Dorle. "You'll lead us back there, as a good captain should."

"Captain?" Dorle grinned. "Then you've decided."

Nasha shrugged. "Fomar argues with me too much. I think, all in all, I really prefer you."

"Then let's go," Dorle said. "Let's go back home."

The ship roared up, flying over the ruins of the city. It turned in a huge arc and then shot off beyond the horizon, heading into outer space.

Down below, in the center of the ruined city, a single half-broken detector vane moved slightly, catching the roar of the ship. The base of the great gun throbbed painfully, straining to turn. After a moment a red warning light flashed on down inside its destroyed works.

And a long way off, a hundred miles from the city, another warning light flashed on, far underground. Automatic relays flew into action. Gears turned, belts whined. On the ground above a section of metal slag slipped back. A ramp appeared.

A moment later a small cart rushed to the surface.

The cart turned toward the city. A second cart appeared behind it. It was loaded with wiring cables. Behind it a third cart came, loaded with telescopic tube sights. And behind came more carts, some with relays, some with firing controls, some with tools and parts, screws and bolts, pins and nuts. The final one contained atomic warheads.

The carts lined up behind the first one, the lead cart. The lead cart started off, across the frozen ground, bumping calmly along, followed by the others. Moving toward the city.

To the damaged gun.



The STAR PLUNDERER

By POUL ANDERSON

Empires start oddly . . . one grew from a mutiny in the hold of a Garzuni slave-ship.

THE following is a part, modernized but otherwise authentic, of that curious book found by excavators of the ruins of Sol City, Terra—the Memoirs of Rear Admiral John Henry Reeves, Imperial Solar Navy. Whether or not the script, obviously never published or intended for publication, is a genuine record left by a man with a taste for dramatized reporting, or whether it is pure fiction, remains an open question; but it was undoubtedly written in the early period of the First Empire and as such gives a remarkable picture of the times and especially of the Founder. Actual events may or may not have been exactly as Reeves



described, but we cannot doubt that in any case they were closely similar. Read this fifth chapter of the Memoirs as historical fiction if you will, but remember that the author must himself have lived through that great and tragic and triumphant age and that he must have been trying throughout the book to give a true picture of the man who even in his own time had become a legend.

Donvar Ayeghen, President of the Galactic Archeological Society

They were closing in now. The leader was a gray bulk filling my sight scope, and every time I glanced over the wall a spanging sleet of bullets brought my head jerking down again. I had some shelter from behind which to shoot in a fragment of wall looming higher than the rest, like a single tooth left in a dead man's jaw, but I had to squeeze the trigger and then duck fast. Once in awhile one of their slugs would burst on my helmet and the gas would be sickly-sweet in my nostrils. I felt ill and dizzy with it.

Kathryn was reloading her own rifle, I heard her swearing as the cartridge clip jammed in the rusty old weapon. I'd have given her my own, except that it wasn't much better. It's no fun fighting with arms that are likely to blow up in your face but it was all we had—all that poor devastated Terra had after the Baldics had sacked her twice in fifteen years.

I fired a burst and saw the big gray barbarian spin on his heels, stagger and scream with all four hands clutching his belly, and sink slowly to his knees. The creatures behind him howled, but he only let out a deep-throated curse. He'd be a long time dying. I'd blown a hole clear through him, but those Gorzuni were tough.

The slugs wailed around us as I got myself down under the wall, hugging the long grass which had grown up around the shattered fragments of the house. There was a fresh wind blowing, rustling the grass and the big war-scarred trees, sailing clouds across a sunny summer sky, so the gas concentration was never enough to put us out. But Jonsson and Hokusai were sprawled like corpses there against the broken wall. They'd taken direct hits and they'd sleep for hours.

Kathryn knelt beside me, the ragged, dirty coverall like a queen's robe on her tall young form, a few dark curls falling from under her helmet for the wind to play with. "If we get them mad enough," she said, "they'll call for the artillery or send a boat overhead to blow us to the Black Planet."

"Maybe," I grunted. "Though they're usually pretty eager for slaves."

"John—" She crouched there a moment, the tiny frown I knew so well darkening her blue eyes. I watched the way leaf-shadows played across her thin brown face. There was a grease smudge on the snub nose, hiding the little freckles. But she still looked good, really good, she and green Terra and life and freedom and all that I'd never have again!

"JOHN," she said at last, "maybe we should save them the trouble. Maybe we should make our own exit."

"It's a thought," I muttered, risking a glance above the wall.

The Gorzuni were more cautious now, creeping through the trampled gardens toward the shattered outbuilding we defended. Behind them, the main estate, last knot of our unit's resistance, lay smashed and burning. Gorzuni were swarming around it, dragging out such humans as survived and looting whatever treasure was left. I was tempted to shoot at those big furry bodies but I had to save ammunition for the detail closing in on us.

"I don't fancy life as the slave of a barbarian outworlder," I said. "Though humans with technical training are much in demand and usually fairly well treated. But for a woman—" The words trailed off. I couldn't say them.

"I might trade on my own mechanical knowledge," she said. "And then again I might not. Is it worth the risk, John, my dearest?"

We were both conditioned against suicide, of course. Everyone in the broken Commonwealth navy was, except bearers of secret information. The idea was to sell our lives or liberty as exorbitantly as possible, fighting to the last moment. It was a stupid policy, typical of the blundering leadership that had helped lose us our wars. A human slave

with knowledge of science and machinery was worth more to the barbarians than the few extra soldiers he could kill out of their hordes by staying alive till captured.

But the implanted inhibition could be broken by a person of strong will. I looked at Kathryn for a moment, there in the tumbled ruins of the house, and her eyes met mine and rested, deep-blue and grave with a tremble of tears behind the long smoky lashes.

"Well—" I said helplessly, and then I kissed her.

It was our big mistake. The Gorzuni had worked closer than I realized and in Terra's gravity—about half of their home planet's —they could move like a sunbound comet. One of them came soaring over the wall behind me, landing on his clawed splay feet with a crash that shivered in the ground. His wild "Whoo-oo-oo-oo!" was hardly out of his mouth before I'd blown the horned, flat-faced head off his shoulders. But there was a gray mass swarming behind him, and Kathryn yelled and fired into the thick of another attack from our rear.

Something stung me, a bright sharp pain and then a bomb exploding in my head and a long sick spiral down into blackness. The last thing I saw was Kathryn, caught in the four arms of a soldier. He was half again as tall as she, he'd twisted the barrel off her gun as he wrenched it from her hands, but she was giving him a good fight. A hell of a good fight. Then I didn't see anything else for some time.

THEY herded us aboard a tender after dark. It was like a scene from some ancient hell—night overhead and around, lit by a score of burning houses like uneasy furnaces out there in the dark, and the long, long line of humans stumbling toward the boat with kicks and blows from the guards to hurry them along.

A house was aflame not far off, soaring red and yellow fire glancing off the metal of the ship, picking a haggard face from shadow, glimmering in human tears and in steely unhuman eyes. The shadows wove in and out, hiding us from each other save when a gust of wind blew up the fire. Then we felt a puff of heat and looked away from each other's misery.

Kathryn was not to be seen in that weaving line. I groped along with my wrists tied behind me, now and then jarred by a gunbutt as one of the looming figures grew impatient. I could hear the sobbing of women and the groaning of men in the dark, before me, behind me, around me as they forced us into the boat.

"Jimmy. Where are you, Jimmy?"

"They killed him. He's lying there dead in the ruins."

"O God, what have we done?"

"My baby. Has anyone seen my baby? I had a baby and they took him away from me."

"Help, help, help, help, help—"

A mumbled and bitter curse, a scream, a whine, a rattling gasp of breath, and always the slow shuffle of feet and the sobbing of the women and the children.

We were the conquered. They had scattered our armies. They had ravaged our cities. They had hunted us through the streets and the hills and the great deeps of space, and we could only snarl and snap at them and hope that the remnants of our navy might pull a miracle. But miracles are hard to come by.

So far the Baldic League had actually occupied only the outer planets. The inner worlds were nominally under Commonwealth rule but the government was hiding or nonexistent. Only fragments of the navy fought on without authority or plan or hope, and Terra was the happy hunting ground of looters and slave raiders. Before long, I supposed bitterly, the outworlders would come in force, break the last resistance, and incorporate all the Solar System into their savage empire. Then the only free humans would be the extrasolar colonists, and a lot of them were barbaric themselves and had joined the Baldic League against the mother world.

The captives were herded into cells aboard the tender, crammed together till there was barely room to stand. Kathryn wasn't in my cell either. I lapsed into dull apathy.

When everyone was aboard, the deckplates quivered under our feet and acceleration jammed us cruelly against each other. Several humans died in that press. I had all I could do to keep the surging mass from crushing in my chest but of course the Gorzuni didn't care. There were plenty more

where we came from.

The boat was an antiquated and rust-eaten wreck, with half its archaic gadgetry broken and useless. They weren't technicians, those Baldics. They were barbarians who had learned too soon how to build and handle spaceships and firearms, and a score of their planets united by a military genius had gone forth to overrun the civilized Commonwealth.

But their knowledge was usually by rote; I have known many a Baldic "engineer" who made sacrifices to his converter, many a general who depended on astrologers or haruspices for major decisions. So trained humans were in considerable demand as slaves. Having a degree in nuclear engineering myself, I could look for a halfway decent berth, though of course there was always the possibility of my being sold to someone who would flay me or blind me or let me break my heart in his mines.

Untrained humans hadn't much chance. They were just flesh-and-blood machines doing work that the barbarians didn't have automatics for, rarely surviving ten years of slavery. Women were the luxury trade, sold at high prices to the human renegades and rebels. I groaned at that thought and tried desperately to assure myself that Kathryn's technical knowledge would keep her in the possession of a nonhuman.

We were taken up to a ship orbiting just above the atmosphere. Airlocks were joined, so I didn't get a look at her from outside, but as soon as we entered I saw that she was a big interstellar transport of the Thurnogan class used primarily for carrying troops to Sol and slaves back, but armed for bear. A formidable fighting ship when properly handled.

There were guards leaning on their rifles, all of Gorzuni race, their harness worn any way they pleased and no formality between officers and men. The barbarian armies' sloppy discipline had blinded our spit-and-polish command to their reckless courage and their savage gunnery. Now the fine-feathered Commonwealth navy was a ragged handful of hunted, desperate men and the despised outworlders were harrying them through the Galaxy.

THIS ship was worse than usual, though. I saw rust and mold on the unpainted plates, The fluoros were dim and in some places burned out. There was a sickening pulse in the gravity generators. The cabins had long ago been stripped of equipment and refurnished with skins, stolen household goods, cooking pots, and weapons. The Gorzuni were all as dirty and unkempt as their ship. They lounged about gnawing on chunks of meat, drinking, dicing, and glancing up now and then to grin at us.

A barbarian who spoke some Anglic bellowed at us to strip. Those who hesitated were cuffed so the teeth rattled in their heads. We threw the clothes in a heap and moved forward slowly past a table where a drunken Gorzuni and a very sober human sat. Medical inspection.

The barbarian "doctor" gave each of us the most cursory glance. Most were waved on. Now and then he would look closer, blearily, at someone.

"Sickly," he grunted. "Never make the trip alive. Kill."

The man or woman or child would scream as he picked up a sword and chopped off the head with one expert sweep.

The human sat halfway on the desk, swinging one leg and whistling softly. Now and again the Gorzuni medic would glance at him in doubt over some slave. The human would look closer. Usually he shoved them on. One or two he tapped for killing.

I got a close look at him as I went by. He was below medium height, strongly built, dark and heavy-faced and beak-nosed, but his eyes were large and blue-gray, the coldest eyes I have ever seen on a human. He wore a loose colorful shirt and trousers, rich material probably stolen from some Terran villa.

"You filthy bastard," I muttered.

He shrugged, indicating the iron slave-collar welded about his neck. "I only work here, Lieutenant," he said mildly. He must have noticed my uniform before I shucked it.

Beyond the desk, a Gorzuni played a hose on us, washing off blood and grime, and then we were herded down the long corridors and by way of wooden ladders (the drop-shafts and elevators weren't working, it seemed) to the cells. Here they separated men and women. We went into adjoining compartments, huge echoing caverns of metal with bunks tiered along the walls,

food troughs, and sanitary facilities the only furnishing.

Dust was thick on the corroded floor, and the air was cold and had a metallic reek. There must have been about five hundred men swarming hopelessly around after the barred door clanged shut on us.

There were windows between the two great cells. We made a rush for them, crying out, pushing and crowding and snarling at each other for first chance to see if our women still lived.

I was large and strong. I shouldered my way through the mob up to the nearest window. A man was there already, flattened against the wall by the sweating bodies behind, reaching through the bars to the three hundred women who swarmed on the other side.

"Agnes!" he shrieked. "Agnes, are you there? Are you alive?"

I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him away. He turned with a curse, and I fed him a mouthful of knuckles and sent him lurching back into the uneasy press of men. "Kathryn!" I howled.

The echoes rolled and boomed in the hollow metal caves, crying voices, prayers and curses and sobs of despair thrown back by the sardonic echoes till our heads shivered with it. "Kathryn! Kathryn!"

Somehow she found me. She came to me and the kiss through those bars dissolved ship and slavery and all the world for that moment. "Oh, John, John, John, you're alive, you're here. Oh, my darling—"

And then she looked around the metal-gleaming dimness and said quickly, urgently: "We'll have a riot on our hands, John, if these people don't calm down. See what you can do with the men. I'll tackle the women."

It was like her. She was the most gallant soul that ever walked under Terran skies, and she had a mind which flashed in an instant to that which must be done. I wondered myself what point there was in stopping a murderous panic. Those who were killed would be better off, wouldn't they? But Kathryn never surrendered so I couldn't either.

We turned back into our crowds, and shouted and pummeled and bullied, and slowly others came to our aid until there was a sobbing quiet in the belly of the slave ship. Then we organized turns at the windows. Kathryn and I both looked away from those reunions, or from the people who found no one. It isn't decent to look at a naked soul.

The engines began to thrum. Under way, outward bound to the ice mountains of Gorzun, no more to see blue skies and green grass, no clean salt smell of ocean and roar of wind in tall trees. Now we were slaves and there was nothing to do but wait.

II

THERE was no time aboard the ship. The few dim fluoros kept our hold forever in its uneasy twilight. The Gorzuni swilled us at such irregular intervals as they thought of it, and we heard only the throb of the engines and the asthmatic sigh of the ventilators. The twice-normal gravity kept most of us too weary even to talk much. But I think it was about forty-eight hours after leaving Terra, when the ship had gone into secondary drive and was leaving the Solar System altogether, that the man with the iron collar came down to us.

He entered with an escort of armed and wary Gorzuni who kept their rifles lifted. We looked up with dull eyes at the short stocky figure. His voice was almost lost in the booming vastness of the hold.

"I'm here to classify you. Come up one at a time and tell me your name and training, if any. I warn you that the penalty for claiming training you haven't got is torture, and you'll be tested if you do make such claims."

We shuffled past. A Gorzuni, the drunken doctor, had a tattoo needle set up and scribbled a number on the palm of each man. This went into the human's notebook, together with name, age, and profession. Those without technical skills, by far the majority, were shoved roughly back. The fifty or so who claimed valuable education went over into a corner.

The needle burned my palm and I sucked the breath between my teeth. The impersonal voice was dim in my ears: "Name?"

"John Henry Reeves, age twenty-five, lieutenant in the Commonwealth navy and nuclear engineer before the wars." I snapped the answers out, my throat harsh and a bitter taste in my mouth. The taste

of defeat.

"Hmmm." I grew aware that the pale chill eyes were resting on me with an odd regard. Suddenly the man's thick lips twisted in a smile. It was a strangely charming smile, it lit his whole dark face with a brief radiance of merriment. "Oh, yes, I remember you, Lieutenant Reeves. You called me, I believe, a filthy bastard."

"I did," I almost snarled. My hand throbbed and stung, I was unwashed and naked and sick with my own helplessness.

"You may be right at that," he nodded. "But I'm in bad need of a couple of assistants. This ship is a wreck. She may never make Gorzun without someone to nurse the engines. Care to help me?"

"No," I said.

"Be reasonable. By refusing you only get yourself locked in the special cell we're keeping for trained slaves. It'll be a long voyage, the monotony will do more to break your spirit than any number of lashings. As my assistant you'll have proper quarters and a chance to move around and use your hands."

I stood thinking. "Did you say you needed two assistants?" I asked.

"Yes. Two who can do something with this ruin of a ship."

"I'll be one," I said, "if I can name the other."

He scowled. "Getting pretty big for the britches you don't have, aren't you?"

"Take it or leave it," I shrugged. "But this person is a hell of a good technician."

"Well, nominate him, then, and I'll see."

"It's a her. My fiancee, Kathryn O'Donnell."

"No." He shook his dark curly head. "No woman."

"No man, then." I grinned at him without mirth.

Anger flamed coldly in his eyes. "I can't *have a woman around* my neck like another millstone."

"She'll carry her own weight and more. She was a j.g. in my own ship, and she fought right there beside me till the end."

The temper was gone without leaving a ripple. Not a stir of expression in the strong, ugly, olive-skinned face that looked up at me. His voice was as flat. "Why didn't you say so before? All right, then, Lieutenant. But the gods help you if you aren't both as advertised!"

IT was hard to believe it about clothes—the difference they made after being just another penned and naked animal. And a meal of stew and coffee, however ill prepared, scrounged at the galley after the warriors had messed, surged in veins and bellies which had grown used to swilling from a pig trough.

I realized bleakly that the man in the iron collar was right. Not many humans could have remained free of soul on the long, heart-cracking voyage to Gorzun. Add the eternal weariness of double weight, the chill dark grimness of our destination planet, utter remoteness from home, blank hopelessness, perhaps a touch of the whip and branding iron, and men became tamed animals trudging meekly at the heels of their masters.

"How long have you been a slave?" I asked our new boss.

He strode beside us as arrogantly as if the ship were his. He was not a tall man for even Kathryn topped him by perhaps five centimeters and his round-skulled head barely reached my shoulder. But he had thick muscular arms, a gorilla breadth of chest and the gravity didn't seem to bother him at all.

"Going on four years," he replied shortly. "My name, by the way, is Manuel Argos, and we might as well be on first-name terms from the start."

A couple of Gorzuni came stalking down the corridor, clanking with metal. We stood aside for the giants, of course, but there was no cringing in Manuel's attitude. His strange eyes followed them speculatively.

We had a cabin near the stern, a tiny cubbyhole with four bunks, bleak and bare, but its scrubbed cleanliness was like a breath of home after the filth of the cell. Wordlessly, Manuel took one of the sleazy blankets and hung it across a bed as a sort of curtain. "It's the best privacy I can offer you, Kathryn," he said.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He sat down on his own bunk and looked up at us. I loomed over him, a blond giant against his squatness. My family had been old and cultured and wealthy before the wars, and he was the nameless sweepings of a hundred slums and spaceports, but from

the first there was never any doubt of who was the leader.

"Here's the story," he said in his curt way. "I knew enough practical engineering in spite of having no formal education to get myself a fairly decent master in whose factories I learned more. Two years ago he sold me to the captain of this ship. I got rid of the so-called chief engineer they had then. It wasn't hard to stir up a murderous quarrel between him and a jealous subordinate. But his successor is a drunken bum one generation removed from the forests.

"In effect, I'm the engineer of this ship. I've also managed to introduce my master, Captain Venjain, to marijuana. It hits a Gorzuni harder than it does a human, and he's a hopeless addict by now. It's partly responsible for the condition of this ship and the laxness among the crew. Poor leadership, poor organization. That's a truism."

I stared at him with a sudden chill along my spine. But it was Kathryn who whispered the question: "Why?"

"Waiting my chance," he snapped. "I'm the one who made junk out of the engines and equipment. I tell them it's old and poorly designed. They think that only my constant work holds the ship together at all but I could have her humming in a week if I cared to. I can't wait too much longer. Sooner or later someone else is going to look at that machinery and tell them it's been deliberately haywired. So I've been waiting for a couple of assistants with technical training and a will to fight. I hope you two fit the bill. If not—" He shrugged. "Go ahead and tell on me. It won't free you. But if you want to risk lives that won't be very long or pleasant on Gorzun, you can help me to take over the ship!"

I stood for some time looking at him. It was uncanny, the way he had sized us up from a glance and a word. Certainly the prospect was frightening. I could feel sweat on my face. My hands were cold. But I'd follow him. Before God, I'd follow him!

Still—"Three of us?" I jeered. "Three of us against a couple of hundred warriors?"

"There'll be more on our side," he said impassively. After a moment's silence he went on: "Naturally, we'll have to watch ourselves. Only two or three of them know Anglic. I'll point them out to you. And of course our work is under surveillance. But the watchers are ignorant. I think you have the brains to fool them."

"I—" Kathryn stood reaching for words. "I can't believe it," she said at last. "A naval vessel in this condition—"

"Things were better under the old Baldic conquerors," admitted Manuel. "The kings who forged the League out of a hundred planets still in barbaric night, savages who'd learned to build spaceships and man atomblasts and little else. But even they succeeded only because there was no real opposition. The Commonwealth society was rotten, corrupt, torn apart by civil wars, its leadership a petrified bureaucracy, its military forces scattered over a thousand restless planets, its people ready to buy peace rather than fight. No wonder the League drove everything before it!

"But after the first sack of Terra fifteen years ago, the barbarians split up. The forceful early rulers were dead, and their sons were warring over an inheritance they didn't know how to rule. The League is divided into two hostile regions now and I don't know how many splinter groups. Their old organization is shot to hell.

"Sol didn't rally in time. It was still under the decadent Commonwealth government. So one branch of the Baldics has now managed to conquer our big planets. But the fact that they've been content to raid and loot the inner worlds instead of occupying them and administering them decently shows the decay of their own society. Given the leadership, we could still throw them out of the Solar System and go on to overrun their home territories. Only the leadership hasn't been forthcoming."

It was a harsh, angry lecture, and I winced and felt resentment within myself. "Damn it, we've fought," I said.

"And been driven back and scattered." His heavy mouth lifted in a snear. "Because there hasn't been a chief who understood strategy and organization, and who could put heart into his men."

"I suppose," I said sarcastically, "that you're that chief."

His answer was flat and calm and utterly assured. "Yes."

IN THE days the followed I got to know more about Manuel Argos. He was never loath to talk about himself.

His race, I suppose, was primarily Mediterranean-Anatolian, with more than a hint of negro and oriental, but I think there must have been some forgotten nordic ancestor who looked out of those ice-blue eyes. A blend of all humanity, such as was not uncommon these days.

His mother had been a day laborer on Venus. His father, though he was never sure, had been a space prospector who died young and never saw his child. When he was thirteen he shipped out for Sirius and had not been in the Solar System since. Now, at forty, he had been spaceman, miner, dock walloper, soldier in the civil wars and against the Baldics, small-time politician on the colony planets, hunter, machinist, and a number of darker things.

Somewhere along the line, he had found time to do an astonishing amount of varied reading, but his reliance was always more on his own senses and reason and intuition than on books. He had been captured four years ago in a Gorzuni raid on Alpha Centauri, and had set himself to study his captors as cold-bloodedly as he had studied his own race.

Yes, I learned a good deal about him but nothing of him. I don't think any living creature ever did. He was not one to open his heart. He went wrapped in loneliness and dreams all his days. Whether the chill of his manner went into his soul, and the rare warmth was only a mask, or whether he was indeed a yearning tenderness sheathed in armor of indifference, no one will ever be sure. And he made a weapon out of that uncertainty, a man never knew what to await from him and was thus forever strained in his presence, open to his will.

"He's a strange sort," said Kathryn once, when we were alone. "I haven't decided whether he's crazy or a genius."

"Maybe both, darling," I suggested, a little irritably. I didn't like to be dominated.

"Maybe. But what is sanity, then?" She shivered and crept close to me. "I don't want to talk about it."

THE ship wallowed on her way, through a bleak glory of stars, alone in light-years of emptiness with her cargo of hate and fear and misery and dreams. We worked, and waited, and the slow days passed.

The laboring old engines had to be fixed. Some show had to be made for the gray-furred giants who watched us in the flickering gloom of the power chambers. We wired and welded and bolted, tested and tore down and rebuilt, sweltering in the heat of bursting atoms that rolled from the anti-radiation shields, deafened by the whine of generators and thud of misadjusted turbines and deep uneven drone of the great converters. We fixed Manuel's sabotage until the ship ran almost smoothly. Later we would on some pretext throw the whole thing out of kilter again. "Penelope's tapestry," said Manuel, and I wondered that a space tramp could make the classical allusion.

"What are we waiting for?" I asked him once. The din of the generator we were overhauling smothered our words. "When do we start our mutiny?"

He glanced up at me. The light of his trouble lamp gleamed off the sweat on his ugly pockmarked face. "At the proper time," he said coldly. "For one thing, it'll be when the captain goes on his next dope jag."

Meanwhile two of the slaves had tried a revolt of their own. When an incautious guard came too near the door of the men's cell one of them reached out and snatched his gun from the holster and shot him down. Then he tried to blast the lock off the bars. When the Gorzuni came down to gas him, his fellow battled them with fists and teeth till the rebels were knocked out. Both were flayed living in the presence of the other captives.

Kathryn couldn't help crying when we were back in our cabin. She buried her face against my breast and wept till I thought she would never stop weeping. I held her close and mumbled whatever foolish words came to me.

"They had it coming," said Manuel. There was contempt in his voice. "The fools. The blind stupid fools! They could at least have held the guard as a hostage and tried to bargain. No, they had to be heroes. They had to shoot him down. Now the example has frightened all the others. Those men deserved being skinned."

After a moment, he added thoughtfully: "Still, if the fear-emotion aroused in the slaves can be turned to hate it may prove useful. The shock has at least jarred them from their apathy."

"You're a heartless bastard," I said tonelessly.

"I have to be, seeing that everyone else chooses to be brainless. These aren't times for the tender-minded, you. This is an age of dissolution and chaos, such as has often happened in history, and only a person who first accepts the realities of the situation can hope to do much about them. We don't live in a cosmos where perfection is possible or even desirable. We have to make our compromises and settle for the goals we have some chance of attaining." To Kathryn, sharply: "Now stop that snuffling. I have to think."

She gave him a wide-eyed tear-blurred look.

"It gives you a hell of an appearance." He grinned nastily. "Nose red, face swollen, a bad case of hiccoughs. Nothing pretty about crying, you."

She drew a shuddering breath and there was anger flushing her cheeks. Gulping back the sobs, she drew away from me and turned her back on him.

"But I stopped her," whispered Manuel to me with a brief impishness.

III

THE endless, meaningless days had worn into a timelessness where I wondered if this ship were not the Flying Dutchman, outward bound forever with a crew of devils and the damned. It was no use trying to hurry Manuel, I gave that up and slipped into the round of work and waiting. Now I think that part of his delay was on purpose, that he wanted to grind the last hope out of the slaves and leave only a hollow yearning for vengeance. They'd fight better that way.

There wasn't much chance to be alone with Kathryn. A brief stolen kiss, a whispered word in the dimness of the engine room, eyes and hands touching lightly across a rusty, greasy machine. That was all. When we returned to our cabin we were too tired, generally, to do much except sleep.

I did once notice Manuel exchange a few words in the slave pen with Ensign Hokusai, who had been captured with Kathryn and myself. Someone had to lead the humans, and Hokusai was the best man for that job. But how had Manuel known? It was part of his genius for understanding.

The end came suddenly. Manuel shook me awake. I blinked wearily at the hated walls around me, feeling the irregular throb of the gravity field that was misbehaving again. More work for us. "All right, all right," I grumbled. "I'm coming."

When he flicked the curtain from Kathryn's bunk and aroused her, I protested. "We can handle it. Let her rest."

"Not now!" he answered. Teeth gleamed white in the darkness of his face. "The captain's off in never-never land. I heard two of the Gorzuni talking about it."

That brought me bolt awake, sitting up with an eerie chill along my spine. "Now—?"

"Take it easy," said Manuel. "Lots of time."

We threw on our clothes and went down the long corridors. The ship was still. Under the heavy shuddering drone of the engines, there was only the whisper of our shoes and the harsh rasp of the breath in my lungs. Kathryn was white-faced, her eyes enormous in the gloom. But she didn't huddle against me. She walked between the two of us and there was a remoteness over her that I couldn't quite understand. Now and then we passed a Gorzuni warrior on some errand of his own, and shrank aside as became slaves. But I saw the bitter triumph in Manuel's gaze as he looked after the titans.

Into the power chambers where the machines loomed in a flickering red twilight like heathen gods there were three Gorzuni standing there, armed engineers who snarled at us. One of them tried to cuff Manuel. He dodged without seeming to notice and bent over the gravity generator and signaled me to help him lift the cover.

I could see that there was a short circuit in one of the field coils, inducing a harmonic that imposed a flutter on the spacewarping current. It wouldn't have taken long to fix. But Manuel scratched his head, and glanced back at the ignorant giants who loomed over our shoulders. He began tracing wires with elaborate puzzlement.

He said to me: "We'll work up to the auxiliary atom-converter. I've fixed that to do what I want."

I knew the Gorzuni couldn't understand us, and that human expressions were meaningless to them, but an uncontrollable shiver

ran along my nerves.

Slowly we fumbled to the squat engine which was the power source for the ship's internal machinery. Manuel hooked in an oscilloscope and studied the trace as if it meant something. "Ah-hah!" he said.

We unbolted the antiradiation shield, exposing the outlet valve. I knew that the angry, blood-red light streaming from it was harmless, that baffles cut off most of the radioactivity, but I couldn't help shrinking from it. When a converter is flushed through the valve, you wear armor.

Manuel went over to a workbench and took a gadget from it which he'd made. I knew it was of no use for repair but he'd pretended to make a tool of it in previous jobs. It was a lead-plated flexible hose springing from a magnetronic pump, with a lot of meters and switches haywired on for pure effect. "Give me a hand, John," he said quietly.

We fixed the pump over the outlet valve and hooked up the two or three controls that really meant something. I heard Kathryn gasp behind me, and the dreadful realization burst into my own brain and numbed my hands. There wasn't even a gasket—

The Gorzuni engineer strode up to us, rumbling a question in his harsh language, his fellows behind him. Manuel answered readily, not taking his gaze off the wildly swinging fake meters.

He turned to me, and I saw the dark laughter in his eyes. "I told them the converter is overdue for a flushing out of waste products," he said in Anglic. "As a matter of fact, the whole ship is."

He took the hose in one hand and the other rested on a switch of the engine. "Don't look, Kathryn," he said tonelessly. Then he threw the switch.

I heard the baffle plates clank down. Manuel had shorted out the automatic safety controls which kept them up when the atoms were burning. I threw a hand over my own eyes and crouched.

The flame that sprang forth was like a bit of the sun. It sheeted from the hose and across the room. I felt my skin shriveling from incandescence and heard the roar of cloven air. In less than a second, Manuel had thrown the baffles back into place but his improvised blaster had torn away the heads of the three Gorzuni and melted the farther wall. Metal glowed white as I looked again, and the angry thunders boomed and echoed and shivered deep in my bones till my skull rang with it.

DROPPING the hose, Manuel stepped over to the dead giants and yanked the guns from their holsters. "One for each of us," he said.

Turning to Kathryn: "Get on a suit of armor and wait down here. The radioactivity is bad, but I don't think it'll prove harmful in the time we need. Shoot anyone who comes in."

"I—" Her voice was faint and thin under the rolling echoes, "I don't want to hide—"

"Damn it, you'll be our guard. We can't let those monsters recapture the engine room. Now, null gravity!" And Manuel switched off the generator.

Free fall yanked me with a hideous nausea. I fought down my outraged stomach and grabbed a post to get myself back down to the deck. Down—no. There was no up and down now. We are floating free. Manuel had nullified the gravity advantage of the Gorzuni.

"All right, John, let's go!" he snapped.

I had time only to clasp Kathryn's hand. Then we were pushing off and soaring out the door and into the corridor beyond. Praise all gods, the Commonwealth navy had at least given its personnel free-fall training. But I wondered how many of the slaves would know how to handle themselves.

The ship roared around us. Two Gorzuni burst from a side cabin, guns in hands. Manuel burned them as they appeared, snatched their weapons, and swung on toward the slave pens.

The lights went out. I swam in a thick darkness alive with the rage of the enemy. "What the hell—" I gasped.

Manuel's answer came dryly out of blackness: "Kathryn knows what to do. I told her a few days ago."

At the moment I had no time to realize the emptiness within me from knowing that those two had been talking without me. There was too much else to do. The Gorzuni were firing blind. Blaster bolts crashed lividly down the halls. Riot was breaking loose. Twice a lightning flash sizzled within centimeters of me. Manuel fired back at isolated

giants, killing them and collecting their guns. Shielded by the dark, we groped our way to the slave pens.

No guards were there. When Manuel began to melt down the locks with low-power blasting I could dimly see the tangle of free-floating naked bodies churning and screaming in the vast gloom. A scene from an ancient hell. The fall of the rebel angels. Man, child of God, had stormed the Stars and been condemned to Hell for it.

And now he was going to burst out!

Hokusai's flat eager face pressed against the bars. "Get us out," he muttered fiercely.

"How many can you trust?" asked Manuel.

"About a hundred. They're keeping their heads, see them waiting over there? And maybe fifty of the women."

"All right. Bring out your followers. Let the rest riot for a while. We can't do anything to help them."

The men came out, grimly and silently, hung there while I opened the female's cage. Manuel passed out such few guns as we had. His voice lifted in the pulsing dark.

"All right. We hold the engine room. I want six with guns to go there now and help Kathryn O'Donnell keep it for us. Otherwise the Gorzuni will recapture it. The rest of us will make for the arsenal."

"How about the bridge?" I asked.

"It'll keep. Right now the Gorzuni are panicked. It's part of their nature, They're worse than humans when it comes to mass stampedes. But it won't last and we have to take advantage of it. Come on!"

Hokusai led the engine room party—his naval training told him where the chamber would be—and I followed Manuel, leading the others out. There were only three or four guns between us but at least we knew where we were going. And by now few of the humans expected to live or cared about much of anything except killing Gorzuni. Manuel had timed it right.

We fumbled through a livid darkness, exchanging shots with warriors who prowled the ship firing at everything that moved. We lost men but we gained weapons. Now and again we found dead aliens, killed in the rioting, and stripped them too. We stopped briefly to release the technicians from their special cage and then shoved violently for the arsenal.

The Gorzuni all had private arms, but the ship's collection was not small. A group of sentries remained at the door, defending it against all comers. They had a portable shield against blaster bolts. I saw our flames splatter off it and saw men die as their fire raked back at us.

"We need a direct charge to draw their attention, while a few of us use the zero gravity to soar 'overhead' and come down on them from 'above,' " said Manuel's cold voice. It was clear, even in that wild lightning-cloven gloom. "John, lead the main attack."

"Like hell!" I gasped. It would be murder. We'd be hewed down as a woodman hews saplings. And there was Kathryn waiting—Then I swallowed rage and fear and lifted a shout to the men. I'm no braver than anyone else but there is an exaltation in battle, and Manuel used it as calculatingly as he used everything else.

We poured against them in a wall of flesh, a wall that they ripped apart and sent lurching back in tattered fragments. It was only an instant of flame and thunder, then Manuel's flying attack was on the defenders, burning them down, and it was over. I realized vaguely that I had a seared patch on my leg. It didn't hurt just then, and I wondered at the minor miracle which had kept me alive.

Manuel fused the door and the remnants of us swarmed in and fell on the racked weapons with a terrible fierceness. Before we had them all loaded a Gorzuni party charged us but we beat them off.

There were flashlights too. We had illumination in the seething dark. Manuel's face leaped out of that night as he gave *his* crisp, swift orders. A gargoyle face, heavy and powerful and ugly, but men jumped at his bidding. A party was assigned to go back to the slave pens and pass out weapons to the other humans and bring them back here.

Reinforcements were sent to the engine room. Mortars and small antigrav cannon were assembled and loaded. The Gorzuni were calming too. Someone had taken charge and was rallying them. We'd have a fight on our hands.

We did!

I don't remember much of those fire-shot

hours. We lost heavily in spite of having superior armament. Some three hundred humans survived the battle. But many of them were badly wounded. But we took the ship. We hunted down the last Gorzuni and flamed those who tried to surrender. There was no mercy in us. The Gorzuni had beaten it out, and now they faced the monster they had created. When the lights went on again three hundred weary humans lived and held the ship.

IV

THERE was a conference in the largest room we could find. Everyone was there, packed together in sweaty silence and staring at the man who had freed them. Theoretically it was a democratic assembly called to decide our next move. In practice Manuel Argos gave his orders.

"First, of course," he said, his soft voice somehow carrying through the whole great chamber, "we have to make repairs, both of battle damage and of the deliberately mishandled machinery. It'll take a week, I imagine, but then we'll have us a sweet ship. By that time, too, you'll have shaken down into a crew. Lieutenant Reeves and Ensign Hokusai will give combat instruction. We're not through fighting yet."

"You mean—" A man stood up in the crowd. "You mean, sir, that we'll have opposition on our return to Sol? I should think we could just sneak in. A planet's too big for blockade, you know, even if the Baldics cared to try."

"I mean," said Manuel calmly, "that we're going on to Gorzun."

It would have meant a riot if everyone hadn't been so tired. As it was, the murmur that ran through the assembly was ominous.

"Look, you," said Manuel patiently, "we'll have us a first-class fighting ship by the time we get there, which none of the enemy has. We'll be an expected vessel, one of their own, and in no case do they expect a raid on their home planet. It's a chance to give them a body blow. The Gorzuni don't name their ships, so I propose we christen ours now—the Revenge."

It was sheer oratory. His voice was like an organ. His words were those of a wrathful angel. He argued and pleaded and bullied and threatened and then blew the trumpets for us. At the end they stood up and cheered for him. Even my own heart lifted, and Kathryn's eyes were wide and shining. Oh, he was cold and harsh and overbearing, but he made us proud to be human.

In the end, it was agreed, and the Solar ship *Revenge,* Captain Manuel Argos, First Mate John Henry Reeves, resumed her way to Gorzun.

In the days and weeks that followed, Manuel talked much of his plans. A devastating raid on Gorzun would shake the barbarian confidence and bring many of their outworld ships swarming back to defend the mother world. Probably the rival half of the Baldic League would seize its chance and fall on a suddenly weakened enemy. The *Revenge* would return to Sol, by that time possessed of the best crew in the known universe, and rally mankind's scattered forces. The war would go on until the System was cleared—

"—and then, of course, continue till all the barbarians have been conquered," said Manuel.

"Why?" I demanded. "Interstellar imperialism can't be made to pay. It does for the barbarians because they haven't the technical facilities to produce at home what they can steal elsewhere. But Sol would only be taking on a burden."

"For defense," said Manuel. "You don't think I'd let a defeated enemy go off to lick his wounds and prepare a new attack, do you? No, everyone but Sol must be disarmed, and the only way to enforce such a peace is for Sol to be the unquestioned ruler." He added thoughtfully: "Oh, the empire won't have to expand forever. Just till it's big enough to defend itself against all comers. And a bit of economic readjustment could make it a paying proposition, too. We could collect tribute, you know."

"An empire—?" asked Kathryn. "But the Commonwealth is democratic—"

"Was democratic!" he snapped. "Now it's rotted away. Too bad, but you can't revive the dead. This is an age in history such as has often occurred before when the enforced peace of Caesarism is the only solution. Maybe not a good solution but better than the devastation we're suffering now. When there's been a long enough period of peace and unity it may be time to think of reinstating the old republicanism.

But that time is many centuries in the future, if it ever comes. Just now the socio-economic conditions aren't right for it."

He took a restless turn about the bridge. A million stars of space in the viewport blazed like a chill crown over his head. "It'll be an empire in fact," he said, "and therefore it should be an empire in name. People will fight and sacrifice and die for a gaudy symbol when the demands of reality don't touch them. We need a hereditary aristocracy to put on a good show. It's always effective, and the archaism is especially valuable to Sol just now. It'll recall the good old glamorous days before space travel. It'll be even more of a symbol now than it was in its own age. Yes, an empire, Kathryn, the Empire of Sol. Peace, ye underlings!"

"Aristocracies decay," I argued. "Despotism is all right as long as you have an able despot but sooner or later a meathead will be born—"

"Not if the dynasty starts with strong men and women, and continues to choose good breeding stock, and raises the sons in the same hard school as the fathers. Then it can last for centuries. Especially in these days of gerontology and hundred-year active lifespans."

I laughed at him. "One ship, and you're planning an empire in the Galaxy!" I jeered. "And you yourself, I suppose, will be the first emperor?"

His eyes were expressionless. "Yes," he said. "Unless I find a better man, which I doubt."

Kathryn bit her lip. "I don't like it," she said. "It's—cruel."

"This is a cruel age, my dear," he said gently.

GORZUN rolled black and huge against a wilderness of stars. The redly illuminated hemisphere was like a sickle of blood as we swept out of secondary drive and rode our gravbeams down toward the night side.

Once only were we challenged. A harsh gabble of words came over the transonic communicator. Manuel answered smoothly in the native language, explaining that our vision set was out of order, and gave the recognition signals contained in the codebook. The warship let us pass.

Down and down and down, the darkened surface swelling beneath us, mountains reaching hungry peaks to rip the vessel's belly out, snow and glaciers and a churning sea lit by three hurtling moons. Blackness and cold and desolation.

Manuel's voice rolled over the intercom: "Look below, men of Sol. Look out the viewports. This is where they were taking us!"

A snarl of pure hatred answered him. That crew would have died to the last human if they could drag Gorzun to oblivion with them. God help me, I felt that way myself.

It had been a long, hard voyage even after our liberation, and the weariness in me was only lifted by the prospect of battle. I'd been working around the clock, training men, organizing the hundred units a modern warcraft needs. Manuel, with Kathryn for secretary and general assistant, had been driving himself even more fiercely, but I hadn't seen much of either of them. We'd all been too busy.

Now the three of us sat on the bridge watching Gorzun shrieking up to meet us. Kathryn was white and still, the hand that rested on mine was cold. I felt a tension within myself that thrummed near the breaking point. My orders to my gun crews were strained. Manuel alone seemed as chill and unruffled as always. There was steel in him. I sometimes wondered if he really was human.

Atmosphere screamed and thundered behind us. We roared over the sea, racing the dawn, and under its cold colorless streaks of light we saw Gorzun's capital city rise from the edge of the world.

I had a dizzying glimpse of squat stone towers, narrow canyons of streets, and the gigantic loom of spaceships on the rim of the city. Then Manuel nodded and I gave my firing orders.

Flame and ruin exploded beneath us. Spaceships burst open and toppled to crush buildings under their huge mass. Stone and metal fused, ran in lava between crumbling walls. The ground opened and swallowed half the town. A blue-white hell of atomic fire winked through the sudden roil of smoke. And the city died.

We slewed skyward, every girder protesting, and raced for the next great spaceport. There was a ship riding above it. Perhaps

they had been alarmed already. We never knew. We opened up, and she fired back, and while we maneuvered in the heavens the *Revenge* dropped her bombs. We took a pounding, but our force-screens held and theirs didn't. The burning ship smashed half the city when it fell.

On to the next site shown by our captured maps. This time we met a cloud of space interceptors. Ground missiles went arcing up against us. The *Revenge* shuddered under the blows. I could almost see our gravity generator smoking as it tried to compensate for our crazy spins and twists and lurchings. We fought them, like a bear fighting a dog pack, and scattered them and laid the base waste.

"All right," said Manuel. ""Let's get out of here."

Space became a blazing night around us as we climbed above the atmosphere. Warships would be thundering on their way now to smash us. But how could we locate a single ship in the enormousness between the worlds? We went into secondary drive, a tricky thing to do so near a sun, but we'd tightened the engines and trained the crew well. In minutes we were at the next planet, also habitable. There were only three colonies there. We smashed them all.

The men were cheering. It was more like the yelp of a wolf pack. The snarl died from my own face and I felt a little sick with all the ruin. Our enemies, yes. But there were many dead. Kathryn wept, slow silent tears running down her face, shoulders shaking.

Manuel reached over and took her hand. "It's done, Kathryn," he said quietly. "We can go home now."

He added after a moment, as if to himself: "Hate is a useful means to an end but damned dangerous. We'll have to get the racist complex out of mankind. We can't conquer anyone, even the Gorzuni, and keep them as inferiors and hope to have a stable empire. All races must be equal." He rubbed his strong square chin. "I think I'll borrow a leaf from the old Romans. All worthy individuals, of any race, can become terrestrial citizens. It'll be a stabilizing factor."

"You," I said, with a harshness in my throat, "are a megalomaniac." But I wasn't sure any longer.

IT WAS winter in Earth's northern hemisphere when the *Revenge* came home. I walked out into snow that crunched under my feet and watched my breath smoking white against the clear pale blue of the sky. A few others had come out with me. They fell on their knees in the snow and kissed it. They were a wild-looking gang, clad in whatever tatters of garment they could find, the men bearded and long-haired, but they were the finest, deadliest fighting crew in the Galaxy now. They stood there looking at the gentle sweep of hills, at blue sky and ice-flashing trees and a single crow hovering far overhead, and tears froze in their beards.

Home.

We had signalled other units of the Navy. There would be some along to pick us up soon and guide us to the secret base on Mercury, and there the fight would go on. But now, just now in this eternal instant, we were home.

I felt weariness like an ache in my bones. I wanted to crawl bear-like into some cave by a murmuring river, under the dear tall trees of Earth, and sleep till spring woke up the world again. But as I stood there, with the thin winter wind like a cleansing bath around me, the tiredness dropped off. My body responded to the world which two billion years of evolution had shaped it for, and I laughed aloud with the joy of it.

We couldn't fail. We were the freemen of Terra fighting for our own hearthfires, and the deep ancient strength of the planet was in us. Victory and the stars lay in our hands, even now, even now.

I turned and saw Kathryn coming down the airlock gangway. My heart stumbled and then began to race. It had been so long, so terribly long. We'd had so little time but now we were home, and she was here and I was here and all the world was singing.

Her face was grave as she approached me. There was something remote about her and a strange blending of pain with the joy that must be in her too. The frost crackled in her dark unbound hair, and when she took my hands her own were cold.

"Kathryn, we're home," I whispered. "We're home, and free, and alive. O Kathryn, I love you!"

She said nothing, but stood looking at me forever and forever until Manuel Argos

came to join us. The little stocky man seemed embarrassed—the first and only time I ever saw him quail, even faintly.

"John," he said, "I've got to tell you something."

"It'll keep," I answered. "You're the captain of the ship. You have authority to perform marriages. I want you to marry Kathryn and me, here, now, on Earth."

She looked at me unwaveringly, but her eyes were blind with tears. "That's it, John," she said, so low I could barely hear her. "It won't be. I'm going to marry Manuel."

I stood there, not saying anything, not even feeling it yet.

"It happened on the voyage," she said, tonelessly. "I tried to fight myself, I couldn't. I love him, John. I love him even more than I love you, and I didn't think that was possible."

"She will be the mother of kings," said Manuel, but his arrogant words were almost defensive. "I couldn't have made a better choice."

"Do you love her too," I asked slowly, "or do you consider her good breeding stock?" Then: "Never mind. Your answer would only be the most expedient. We'll never know the truth."

It was instinct, I thought with a great resurgence of weariness. A strong and vital woman would pick the most suitable mate. She couldn't help herself. It was the race within her and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Bless you, my children," I said.

They walked away after awhile, hand in hand under the high trees that glittered with ice and sun. I stood watching them until they were out of sight. Even then, with a long and desperate struggle yet to come, I think I knew that those were the parents of the Empire and the glorious Argolid dynasty, that they carried the future within them.

And I didn't give a damn.

THOMPSON'S CAT

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

The weird, invisible insect depopulated an entire planet. Now it was felling Thompson's crew as his ship hurtled toward the sun . . . certain death for all, including the disease carrier. Forgotten in the panic was Buster, Thompson's wise cat.

"IT'S a dead world," Thompson spoke. There was awe in his voice, and in spite of his sure knowledge that nothing could happen to him or to his crew here on this world, there was also somewhere inside of him the trace of a beginning fear.

Standing beside him on the rooftop of the building, Kurkil spoke in a whisper, asking a question that had been better unasked. "What killed it?"

Thompson stirred fretfully. He hadn't wanted to hear this question, he didn't want to hear it now. His gaze went automatically to the trim lines of the space cruiser resting quietly in the square below the building. His spirits lifted at the sight. That was his ship, he was in charge of this far-flung exploring expedition thrown out from Sol Cluster to the fringes of the universe, thrown out by Earth-sired races beginning their long exploration of the mysteries of space and of the worlds of space. There was pride in the sight of the ship and pride in the thought of belonging to this space-ranging race. Then his gaze want over the deserted city radiating in all directions from them and he was aware again of the touch of fear.

Resolutely he turned the feeling out of his mind, began seeking an answer to Kurkil's question.

This place had been a city once. If you counted buildings and streets, tall structures where people might work quietly and effectively, broad avenues leading out to trim homes where they might rest in peace after their labors of the day, if you counted these things as being important, it was still a city. But if you thought that the important element in the make-up of a city was its inhabitants then this place no longer deserved the name.

It had no inhabitants.

"I don't know what killed it," Thompson said. Before landing they had circled this world. From the air they had seen more than a dozen cities such as this one. All of them dead, all of them deserted, all of them with streets overgrown by shrubbery, the pavements buckling from the simple pressure of roots pushing upward, the buildings falling away into ruin for the same reason. But they had seen no inhabitants. They had seen the roads the inhabitants had built to connect their cities, deserted now. They had seen the fields where these people had once worked, fields that now were turning back into forests. They had seen no evidence of landings fields for air craft or space ships. The race that had built the cities had not yet learned the secret of wings.

From the roof of the building where they stood, the only living creatures to be seen were visible through the plastic viewport of the ship below them—Grant, the communication specialist, and Buster, the ship's cat.

Grant had been left to guard the vessel. Buster had been required to remain within the ship, obviously against his will. He had wanted to come with Thompson. A trace of a grin came to Thompson's face at the sight of the cat. He and Buster were firm mutual friends.

"I don't like this place," Kurkil spoke suddenly. "We shouldn't have landed here."

Kurkil paused, then his voice came again, stronger now, and with overtones of fear in it. "There's death here." He slapped at his arm, stared around him.

"What happened?"



"Something bit me." He showed the back of his hand. A tiny puncture was visible.

"Some insect," Thompson said. The matter of an insect bite was of no concern. Kurkil, and every other member of this expedition, were disease-proof. Back in Sol Cluster vaccines and immunizing agents had been developed against every known or conceivable form of germ or virus. Each member of the crew had been carefully immunized. In addition, they had been proofed against stress, against mounting neural pressure resulting from facing real or imaginary danger.

Barring space collision or an accident on a world they were exploring, nothing could happen to them.

"We checked the air, took soil and vegetation samples, before we landed," Thompson said. "There is nothing here that is harmful to a human." There was comfort in the thought.

Kurkil brightened perceptibly. "But, what happened to the race that built this city?"

"I DON'T know," Thompson answered. A tinge of gruffness crept into his voice as he forced out of his mind the memories of what they had seen in this building they had entered and had climbed. This had once been an office building, a place where the unknown people who had worked here had handled their business transactions and had kept their records. They had seen no bookkeeping machines, none of the elaborate mechanical devices used in Sol Cluster to record the pulse of commerce. This race had not progressed that far. But they had left behind them books written in an unintelligible script, orders for merchandise still neatly pigeonholed, all in good order with no sign of disturbance.

The workers might have left these offices yesterday, except for the carpets of dust that covered everything.

"There isn't even any animal life left," Kurkil spoke.

"I know."

"But what happened? A race that has progressed to the city-building stage doesn't just get wiped out without leaving some indication of what happened to them."

"Apparently they did just that."

"But it's not possible."

"It happened."

"But—"

"There's Neff," Thompson spoke. Far down the avenue below them, three figures had appeared, Neff, Fortune, and Ross, Neff tall and slender, Fortune round like a ball, and Ross built square like a block of concrete. Neff saw them on top of the building and beckoned to them. There was urgency in the gesture.

"They've found something," Thompson said. With Kurkil following him he went hastily out of the building.

"What is it?"

"Come and see," Neff answered. Neff's face was gray. Fortune and Ross were silent.

The building in front of which they were standing had been a house once. The architecture resembled nothing they had ever seen on Earth but the purpose of the structure was obvious. Here somebody had lived. Thompson tried to imagine people living here, the husband coming home in the evening to the dinner prepared by the wife, kids running to meet him. His imagination failed.

"Back here," Neff said.

They went around what had been a house into what had been a garden of some kind, a quiet nook where a family might sprawl in peace. "There," Neff said pointing.

The three skeletons were huddled together in an alcove in front of what had once been a shrine. They lay facing the shrine as if they had died praying. Above them in a niche in a wall was—

"An idol," Kurkil whispered.

"They died praying to their god," Thompson said. He was not aware that he had spoken. Three skeletons . . .

The bones indicated a creature very similar to the human in structure. A large, a middle-sized, and a small skeleton.

"We think the small one is that of a child," Ross spoke. "We think this was a family."

"I see," Thompson said. "Did you find other skeletons?"

"Many others. We found them almost everywhere but usually tucked away in corners, as if the people had tried to hide from something." His voice went suddenly into uneasy silence.

"Any indication as to the cause of death?"

"None. It apparently came on quite suddenly. We judge that the inhabitants had some warning. At least we do not seem to find enough skeletons for a city of this size, so we estimate that part of the population fled, or tried to."

"I see," Thompson repeated tonelessly. He caught a vague impression that something had passed before his eyes, like a darting flicker of light, and he caught, momentarily, a fast rustle in the air, as of souls passing. His mind was on the flight of this race, the mass hegira they had attempted in an effort to escape from some menace. What menace? "What do you think caused it?"

Ross shrugged, a gesture eloquent with a lack of knowledge and of understanding. "War—"

"No wars were fought on this planet," Neff spoke quickly. "These cities show no evidence of conflict."

"Um," Thompson said. The four men were looking uneasily at him. They were waiting for him to make up his mind, to decide on a course of action.

Thompson did not like his own thinking. Something—the blood-brother of death—had been here on this planet, that much was certain. The evidence was everywhere.

"We will return to the ship," Thompson said.

Grant saw them coming, had the lock open for them. His worried face looked out at them. "What gives here?"

"We don't know," Thompson answered. The cat, Buster, pushed forward between Grant's legs, took a long leap at Thompson's chest, made a twenty-claw safe landing there. "Hi, old fellow, were you worried about me?"

They passed through the lock. "Take her up," Thompson said. "We need a little time to think about this enigma. Maybe we can think better when we're not so close to it."

At his words, relief showed on the faces of the men. "Maybe sometime soon we'll be heading for home?" Kurkil spoke, grinning hopefully.

"You can be certain of that," Thompson said.

THE ship lifted, hung miles high in the air above the silent planet. The group considered the problem.

"I vote to make a complete investigation," Grant said. He was full of eager enthusiasm. "There was a race here. Something happened to it. We've got to find out what happened because—" He got no further. Slowly the enthusiasm went from his face. "No, that's not possible," he ended.

"There's no danger of the virus that destroyed this race crossing space to Sol Cluster," Kurkil spoke. "The distance is too great."

"The distance wasn't too great for us to cross it," Fortune spoke.

"Please," Thompson interrupted. "We can't use logic on this situation until we have adequate data. The only data we have—" His voice trailed off into silence as his memory presented him with a facsimile of that data—silent, deserted cities, a world going back to vegetation, three skeletons in front of a shrine.

Abruptly he reached a decision. It was impulsive. "Our tour of exploration is near an end anyhow. We're leaving. We're heading back to Sol Cluster. We'll mark this planet on the star maps for further exploration."

The face of every man present brightened as he made the announcement. Sol Cluster! Home! The green world of Earth across the depths of space. In even the thought there was almost enough magic to wipe out the fear of what they'd seen back there on the deserted planet.

Less than an hour later, the drone of the drivers picked up as the ship, already set on course, began to accelerate in preparation for the pump into hyper-flight. Thompson was in his cabin making a final check of the machine-provided flight data. Buster was in his lap half-asleep. Suddenly the cat jumped from his lap and seemed to pounce on some elusive prey in the room. The cat caught what it was seeking, its jaws crunched, it swallowed.

Thompson stared at the cat from disbelieving eyes. "Buster, are you dreaming? Did you dream there was a mouse in here?"

The cat meowed, came toward him, jumped again into his lap and went back to sleep. Thompson returned to his figures. They were correct.

Over the ship's communication system came the soft throb of a gong. The warning that the jump was coming. In his lap, Buster

awakened, instantly sank twenty claws into Thompson's clothing. Thompson reached out and took a firm grip on the hand holds on his desk, began to breathe deeply. The gong sounded again. Final warning that the ship was going into hyper-flight. Thompson took as deeep a breath as possible, held it.

The gong went into silence. The ship throbbed. The jump was in progress. Thompson had the dazed impression that every atom in his body tried to turn over at once. For a moment, there was a feeling of intense strain. Then the feeling was gone as the ship and its contents passed into hyper-flight. Thompson began to breathe again. In his lap, Buster relaxed his claw holds, began to purr. Buster was an old hand at taking these jumps.

"EEEEEEyooow!"

The eerie scream that came echoing through the ship seemed to lift up every single strand of hair on Thompson's head. Thompson ran out of the cabin. The scream came again, from the lounge. Thompson entered the lounge just in time to see Kurkil standing in the middle of the room, rip the last remnant of clothing from his body. Revealed under the lights, his skin was turning a vivid green.

Fortune was trying to approach him. Kurkil was warning the man off.

"Stay away, stay away. Don't touch me. You'll get it."

In the split second that was needed for Thompson to take in the situation, the green color flowing over Kurkil's body deepened in intensity.

As the color deepened, the screams bubbling on his lips began to die away. He fell slowly, like a man who is coming unhinged one joint at a time.

He was dead before he hit the floor. Dead so completely that not even a convulsive tremor passed through his body.

A frozen silence held the lounge. For this was a dream, a nightmare, wild, distorted imagery.

Fortune's hand waved vaguely in the direction of Sol Cluster. "It looks as if we're not as bug and stress proof as they said we were."

"What happened?"

"He was sitting there in the chair and I thought he was asleep. Then he was screaming and tearing his clothes off." Ross spread his hands. "I tried to help—"

"I know," Thompson said. He was trying to decide what to do. This ship possessed no facilities for handling the dead. Such a contingency had been thought too remote for consideration. Well, there was the ejection port. "Get sheets," Thompson said. With Fortune and Ross helping, he set about doing what had to be done.

LATER, in the lounge, they met to decide what had to be done. Neff, leaving the drivers on automatic control, came up from the engine room. Grant came forward from the control room. If any danger presented itself, warning bells would call them back to their posts.

They were a silent and an uneasy group. Only Buster remained unaffected.

"There seems no doubt that we brought the infection back on board ship with us," Thompson said.

He had stated the obvious. It got the answer it deserved. Silence.

"We also must consider the possibility that another of us, possibly all of us, are infected."

No man stirred, no man spoke. Apparently they hoped they had not heard correctly the words that had been spoken. In Thompson's lap Buster grumbled as if he had understood and did not like what had been said.

"What are we going to do?"

"How can we find out what's causing this disease?"

Two voices came. Then came Fortune's voice. "And even if we find out, what can we do about it? *They* couldn't do anything about it."

"The fact that the race back there couldn't stop the disease, doesn't mean we can't stop it. We're a different race with a different metabolism and a different body structure—"

"Kurkil had the same metabolism and the same body structure," Ross said.

"We will do what we can," Thompson spoke flatly. In spite of the fact that these men were supposed to be nerve proof, there was panic in the air. He could sense it, knew that it had to be stopped before it got started. Inwardly he cursed the fact that there was no doctor aboard, but he knew only too well the line of reasoning that

had led to the omission of a physician.

"We have a medical library," Ross said, tentatively.

"Yes," Fortune spoke. "And it tells you exactly how to treat every conceivable form of accident but it doesn't say a single damned word about infections, and if it did we don't have any medicine to treat them.

Again silence fell. In Thompson's lap, Buster squirmed, dropped to the floor. Tail extended, body low, he moved across the plastic floor as if he were stalking something that lay beyond the open door. "We'll fumigate anyhow," Thompson said. "We'll scour the ship."

There was some relief in action. The clothing that had been worn by the landing party went out through the ejection lock. Inside the ship, the floors, walls, and ceilings were scoured by sweating men who worked feverishly. Fumigants were spread in every room.

With the spreading of the fumigants, spirits began to rise, but even then the signs of stress were still all too obvious. No one knew the incubation period of the virus. Hours only had been needed to bring Kurkil to his death. But days might pass before the virus developed in its next victim.

Months or even years might pass before they were absolutely sure they were free from any chance of infection.

By the time the ship reached Sol Cluster, and the automatic controls stopped its hyper-flight, they might all be dead.

If that happened, the ship's controls would automatically stop its flight. It would be picked up by the far-ranging screens of the space patrol, a ship would be sent out to board it and bring it in.

At the thought of what would happen then, Thompson went hastily forward to the control room. Grant, thin-lipped and nervous, was on duty there. Thompson hastily began plotting a new course. Grant watched over his shoulder.

"Make this change," Thompson said.

"But, Captain—" Grant protested. The man's face had gone utterly white as he realized the implications of this new course. "No. We can't do that. It'll mean—"

"I know what it will mean. And I'm in my right mind, I hope. This course is a precaution, just in case nobody is left alive by the time we reach Sol Cluster."

"But—"

"Make the change," Thompson ordered bluntly.

Reluctantly Grant fed the new course into the computors. A throb went through the vessel as the ship shifted in response.

"We'll come out of hyper-flight in less than three hours," Grant spoke. "Heaven help us if this course is not changed before that time."

"If this course is not changed before that time, Heaven alone can help us. From now on, you're not to leave this control room for an instant."

"Yes, sir."

With Buster following behind him, Thompson left the control room.

"Yoooow!" The scream coming from the lounge this time was in a different key and had a different sound. But the meaning was the same as it had been when Kurkil had screamed. Thompson went forward on the run.

The victim was Ross. Like Kurkil, he was tearing his clothes off. Like Kurkil, he was turning green. When he went down, he did not rise again.

As he stood staring down at Ross, Thompson had the vague impression of whirring wings passing near him. Whispering wings, as if a soul were taking flight.

From the engine room Neff appeared. "I heard somebody scream over the intercom. Oh, I see." His face worked, his jaws moved as if he was trying to speak. But no sound came.

Fortune emerged from his quarters to look down at Ross. "Our fumigating didn't work, huh?"

"Maybe he caught the bug on the planet," Thompson said. He tried to put conviction into his voice. The effort failed. "Get sheets," he said.

THERE was no prayer. There was no burial ceremony. The body went through the ejection port and disappeared in the vast depths of space.

Thompson returned to his cabin, slumped down at his desk, Fortune and Neff following.

Buster meowed. "Okay, pal." The cat jumped into Thompson's lap.

"I guess there's not much point in trying

to kid ourselves any longer," Fortune said. His voice was dull and flat, without tone and without spirit. A muscle in Neff's cheek was twitching.

"I don't understand you," Thompson said.

"Hell, you understand me well enough. The facts are obvious. We've either all got the virus, or it's here in the ship, and we will get it. All we're doing is waiting to see who goes next. What I want to know is—Who'll shove the last man through the ejection port?"

"I don't know," Thompson answered.

"Isn't there anything else we can do?" The tic in Neff's cheek was becoming more pronounced.

"If there is, I don't know— What the hell, Buster?" The cat which had been lying in his lap, suddenly leaped to the floor. Tail extended, crouched, eyes alert, the cat seemed to be trying to follow the flight of something through the air above him.

Very vaguely, very dimly, Thompson caught the rustle of wings.

The actions of the cat, and the sound, sent a wave of utter cold washing over his body.

Before he could move, the cat leaped upward, caught something in snapping jaws.

In the same split second Thompson moved. Before Buster had had time to swallow, Thompson had caught him behind the jaws, forcing them shut. On his desk was a bell jar. He lifted it, thrust the cat's head under it, forced his thumb and forefinger against the jaws of the cat.

The outraged Buster disgorged something. Thompson jerked the cat's head from under the jar, slammed down the rim. The angry cat snarled at him. Neff and Fortune were staring at him from eyes that indicated they thought he had lost his senses. Thompson paid them no attention. He was too busy *watching* something inside the bell jar even to notice that they existed.

He could not see the creature under the jar.

He knew it could fly but he did not know its shape or size. He could hear it hitting the falls of the jar. And each time it hit the wall, a tiny greenish smudge appeared at the point of impact.

"What—what the hell have you got there?" Neff whispered.

"I don't know for sure. But I think I've got the carrier of the virus."

"What?"

"Watch."

"I can't see anything."

"Nor can I yet, but I can hear it and I can see the places where it hits the wall of the jar. There's something under the jar. Something that Buster has been seeing all along."

"What?"

Thompson pointed at the jar. "One or several of those things came into the ship when the lock was open. We couldn't see them, didn't know they existed. But Buster saw them. He caught one of them in this cabin soon after we took off. I thought he was playing a game to amuse himself, or—" He broke off. From the back of his mind came a fragment of history, now in the forgotten Dark Ages of Earth, whole populations had been ravaged and destroyed by a fever that was carried by some kind of an insect. Did they have some kind of an insect under his jar?

Holding his breath, Thompson watched.

The pounding against the walls of the jar was growing weaker. Then it stopped. On the desk top, a smudge appeared. Wings quavered there, wings that shifted through a range of rainbow colors as they became visible.

As the flutter of the wings stopped the whole creature became visible. Made up of some kind of exceedingly thin tissue that was hardly visible, it was about as big as a humming bird.

Silence held the room. Thompson was aware of his eyes coming to focus on the long pointed bill of the creature.

"Alive it was not visible at all," Fortune whispered. "Dead, you can see it." His voice lifted, picked up overtones of terror. "Say an hour or so ago Ross was complaining that something had bit him."

Like the last remnant of a picture puzzle fitting together, something clicked in Thompson's mind. "And Kurkil. While we were out of the ship something bit him."

Silence again. His eyes went from Neff to Fortune. "Did—"

They shook their heads.

"Then that ties up the package," Thompson whispered. "This creature carried the virus, or poison, or whatever it was. With-

out being bitten, the virus cannot spread. We've found the cause. We've got it licked."

He was aware of sweat appearing on his face, the sweat of pure relief. He sank back into his chair. Buster, recovering from his indignity at the outrage he had suffered, jumped to the top of the desk, settled down with his nose against the glass, watching the dead creature inside the bell jar.

"He caught one of those things right in this cabin," Thompson whispered. A shudder passed over him and was gone. He had been so close to death, and had not known it. Buster had saved him.

Instead of seeking protection from him, the cat, in a sense, had been protecting him. His gaze centered fondly on the cat.

"What if there are more of those things in the ship?" Fortune spoke.

"We can solve that one," Thompson spoke. "Space suits. And, now that we know what we're looking for, we can clean out the ship. If we don't, Buster will do it for us."

"Space suits!" As if he had heard no more than those two words, Fortune ran from the room. He returned with three suits. They hastily donned them.

"No damned bug can bite through one of these things," Neff said exultantly. "Say, what about Grant? Hadn't we better take him a suit too?"

"I should say so. Fortune. . . ." But Fortune was already leaving the room on his errand. Thompson snapped open the intercom system. "Grant?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"We've found the cause and we've got the disease licked."

Grant's voice a shout coming back from the control room. "Thank God. I've been sitting here watching Sol grow bigger and bigger. . . ." His voice suddenly choked, went into silence, then came again, asking a question. "Is it all right to change course now?"

"Definitely it's all right," Thompson answered. "In fact, it's an order."

An instant later, the ship groaned as the direction of flight was shifted. Thompson took a deep breath, was aware that Neff was staring at him. "What was that he said about watching Sol grow bigger and bigger? Say, what course were we on?"

"Collision course with the sun," Thompson answered.

"What?" Neff gasped. "Do you mean to say that you were going to throw the ship into the sun?"

Slowly Thompson nodded. "I didn't know whether we would be alive or not but I didn't want this ship to enter Sol Cluster and turn loose there the virus that had already depopulated a planet."

He spoke slowly, with the sure knowledge of a desperate danger safely passed. Neff stared at him from round and frightened eyes.

On the desk top Buster gave up his vigil, meowed, and jumped into the captain's lap. With the thick gloves of his space suit clad hands, Thompson fondly stroked him.

Buster arched his back in grateful appreciation and began to purr.

BIG PILL

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb. New. Untested. Would its terrible power sweep the stark Saturnian moon of Titan from space . . . or miraculously create a flourishing paradise-colony?

UNDER the glow of Saturn and his Rings, five of the airdomes of the new colony on Titan were still inflated. They were enormous bubbles of clear, flexible plastic. But the sixth airdome had flattened. And beneath its collapsed roof, propped now by metal rods, a dozen men in spacesuits had just lost all hope of rescuing the victims of the accident.

Bert Kraskow, once of Oklahoma City, more recently a space-freighter pilot, and now officially just a colonist, was among them. His small, hard body sagged, as if by weariness. His lips curled. But his full anger and bitterness didn't show.

"Nine dead," he remarked into the radiophone of his oxygen helmet. "No survivors." And then, inaudibly, inside his mind: "I'm a stinkin' fool. Why didn't we act against Space Colonists' Supply, Incorporated, before this could happen?"

His gaze swung back to the great rent that had opened in a seam in the airdome—under only normal Earthly atmospheric pressure, when it should have been able to withstand much more. Instantly the warmed air had rushed out into the near-vacuum of Titan, Saturn's largest moon. Those who had been working the night-shift under the dome, to set up prefabricated cottages, had discarded their spacesuits for better freedom of movement. It was the regulation thing to do; always considered safe. But they had been caught by the sudden dropping of pressure around them to almost zero. And by the terrible cold of the Titanian night.

For a grief-stricken second Bert Kraskow looked down again at the body beside which he stood. You could hardly see that the face had been young. The eyes popped. The pupils were white, like ice. The fluid within had frozen. The mouth hung open. In the absence of normal air-pressure, the blood in the body had boiled for a moment, before the cold had congealed it.

"Your kid brother, Nick, eh, Bert?" an air-conditioning mechanic named Lawler said, almost in a whisper. "About twenty years old, hunh?"

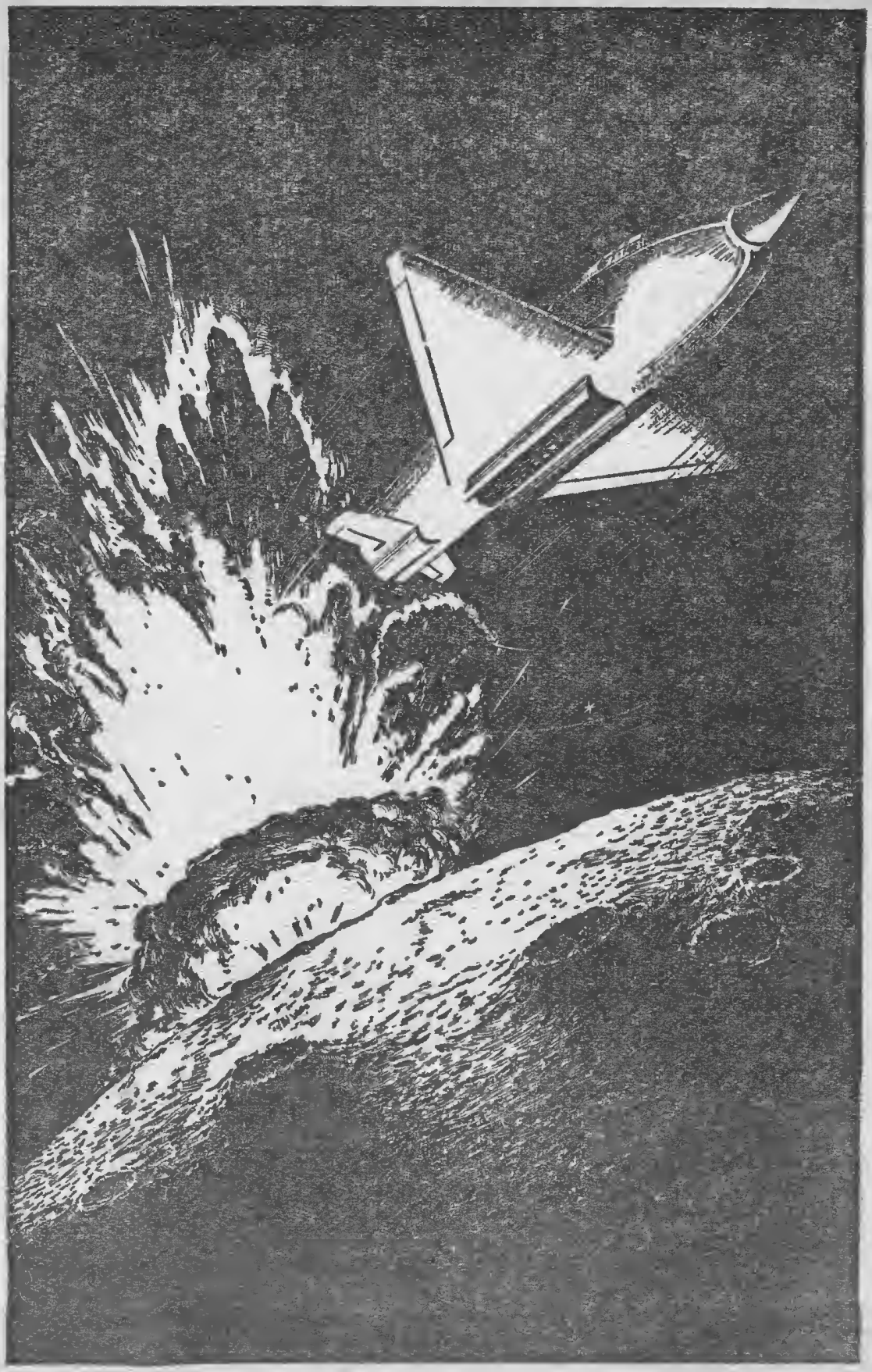
"Eighteen," Bert Kraskow answered into his helmet-phones as he spread the youth's coat over the distorted face.

Old Stan Kraskow, metal-worker, was there, too. Bert's and Nick's dad. He was blubbering. There wasn't much that anybody could do for him. And for the other dead, there were other horrified mourners. Some of them had been half nuts from homesickness, and the sight of harsh, voidal stars, even before this tragedy had happened.

It was Lawler who first cut loose, cursing. He was a big, apish man, with a certain fiery eloquence.

"Damned, lousy, stinkin' obsolete equipment!" he snarled. "Breathe on it and it falls apart! Under old Bill Lauren, Space Colonists' Supply used to make good, honest stuff. I worked with it on Mars and the moons of Jupiter. But now look what the firm is turning out under Trenton Lauren, old Bill's super-efficient son! He was so greedy for quick profits in the new Titan colonization project, and so afraid of being scooped by new methods of making these fizzled-out worlds livable, that he didn't even take time to have his products decently inspected! And that, after not being able to recognize progress! Hell! Where is that dumb, crawlin' boob?"

There was a moment of silence. Then



somebody muttered: "Speak of the devil! . . ."

WITH eyes that had grown quietly wolfish, Bert Kraskow saw Trenton Lauren arrive at last from the administration dome. He was plump, maybe thirty-five, and somehow dapper even in a spacesuit. That he was here on Titan at all, and not in a pressurized settlement on Mars, or at the main office of his firm in Chicago, was a cocky gesture of bravado, a leaf torn from the book of his more worthy sire, and perhaps more particularly an attempt to counteract the consequences of his bad business judgment, personally.

The fear of one who sees how his haste and breed can be called punishable criminal negligence, was in his face. The things that had been human, sprawled stiff before him, accusing him. But the worst was the presence of those grim, silent men, who might add him forcibly to the death-list. That moment held crystallized in it the conflict of an urge to win vast profits, with the payment in human lives that had been exacted this time.

Near-dead Titan was the present step in mankind's outward march of colonial dominion toward the stars. Titan itself was rich in the radioactive ores that has become the fuel, the moving force, not only of the rockets of Earth's expanding space-commerce, but of the wheels of industry and comfort at home. And richer in those elements were the Rings of Saturn, nearby, those stupendous, whirling bands of dust, wreckage of a broken satellite in which, as in any other planet or moon most of those heaviest, costliest metals had originally sunk to its center, far out of reach of mining operations. But in the Rings, all this incalculable wealth of uranium, radium, osmium, and so forth, not to mention millions of tons of useless gold, was uniquely exposed as easily accessible dust.

Oh, yes. And the S.C.S.—Space Colonists' Supply—wanted its cut for providing equipment, as received elsewhere in the past. Bert Kraskow knew that this must remain dapper Trenton Lauren's aim, in spite of a vast and possibly ruinous investment in manufactured goods that could turn out to be obsolete and unmarketable, in addition to its poor quality.

Bert studied Lauren from between narrowed eyelids, weighing his qualities further, judging, ever predicting. Trenton Lauren might hate himself some for the deaths that were his responsibility. Yet Bert bet that he hated himself more for having to explain the failure of one of his airdomes to these crude colonists. It hurt his ego. Lauren was full of fear; he was a stuffy, visionless conservative, but he was wily, too.

Bert saw his lips tighten, as he marshalled his forces to smooth down the fury of the men before him.

"I'm deeply sorry that these people had to die," he said in his high-pitched voice. "But chance-taking is part of any new space-venture. And all who use airdomes, spacesuits, or other S.C.S. equipment, are insured against its defective performance. Ten thousand dollars, paid in case of death, is still a lot of money. S.C.S. has made fine products for over forty years. No dangerous, new-fangled ideas can yet replace them. Considering the risk inherent in space colonization, occasional mishaps can hardly be avoided. You all know that. Business—life—everything—is a gamble."

Sure. About chance-taking there was truth in his pompous words. But did one buy a life with a few thousand dollars, or call money a just penalty for obvious and deadly neglect?

Knots of muscle gathered at the angles or Lawler's square jaw. Old Stan Kraskow stared at Lauren as if he didn't believe that anybody could talk so stupidly.

Bert Kraskow's savage blood seethed. But when he was really sore his tendency was to be coldly and quietly logical in his speech and actions. The plans to change things were made. He was in on them. And what was the use of getting into arguments that might give the enemy a hint? Or set off violence that might spoil everything?

"Easy," he whispered. "Dad! Lawler! Don't talk. Don't start anything."

But Alice Leland Kraskow, Bert's wife, had arrived on the scene. She was little and dark and fiery, one of the few feminine colonists yet on Titan. In another airdome, where Bert and she had their cottage, she had been awakened by the shouts of those who had seen the accident take place. Donning a spacesuit, she had followed the

crowd.

Being at a little distance from her, Bert had no chance to shush her outspoken comments. And to try might have done no good, anyway. She had truth to tell, and a woman's tongue to tell it.

"Yes, Mr. Lauren," she said pointedly. "We're all gamblers. Granted. But you started to cheat even before you were afraid of losing. Maybe it's time we did something about it."

Trenton Lauren looked more scared than before. But now, as two Space Patrolmen in their silvery armor, arrived from their quarters and stood beside him, he smiled a little.

"Madam," he drawled, "maybe I know what you mean. You want to defy the law. Someone around here has been hoping for word from Earth that an okay has been granted by the Safe Products Approval Board, for, shall we say, a radically new product? Well, the optimists will wait a long time for such approval at the S. P. A. B. The action of this invention is, to say the least, extremely dangerous. So, if they're that foolish, those optimists might as well go ahead with their alternate course: To bring their deadly and spectacular innovation dramatically into use without the stamp of safety!"

Bert's concern about his wife's outspoken challenge to Lauren was thus suddenly diverted. His jaw hardened further. A nagging suspicion that Trenton Lauren had found things out, was confirmed. It meant, perhaps, that Lauren had already taken counteraction secretly.

Bert Kraskow longed to beat up Lauren in spite of the presence of the two space policemen. But the need for immediate and better action denied him this extravagant luxury. He went to his wife's side and took her arm.

"Lauren," he said. "I've got a brother to bury. So discussions are out, for now. Guys, will you bring Nick's body to my cottage? Come on, Allie . . ."

BERT was trying very hard to slip away unobtrusively when Lauren grinned mockingly. "Hold on, Kraskow," he snapped. "You're tangled up in this matter, somehow. I've learned that you've already broken a minor law by landing a ship quietly out in the deserts of Titan without declaring its presence; a ship that can be assumed reasonably to be freighted with lethal materials. As a dangerous individual, you can be put under an arrest of restraint. Legal technicalities can be disregarded in a raw colonization project where people are apt to show hysteria, and where something like military law must be enforced for general protection. The say-so of an old and honorable firm like S. C. S. that you are a menace, can, I am sure, be accepted. Patrolmen, take him!"

The cops were puzzled. They offered no immediate objection as Bert, leading his wife, tried to pass them. But Lauren got in Bert's way to prevent him from slipping into the glowering crowd.

Against a man in space-armor, fists weren't very effective; still Bert had the satisfaction of giving Lauren a mighty shove that sent him sprawling. A terrible fury was behind it. The desperation of a last chance. Here was where he had to become completely outlaw.

Alice and he threaded their way through the crowd where the cops could use neither their blasters nor their paralyzers, in spite of Lauren's frantic urging to "Get them!"

Once in the clear, Bert ran with his wife. There was no question of destination. They came to a metal shed. Inside it, beside the small spaceboat, they found Lawler who had anticipated where Bert would go.

The two men spoke to each other with their helmet radios shut off to avoid eavesdropping. They clasped hands so that the sound-waves of their voices would have a channel over which to pass, in the absence of a sufficiently dense atmosphere.

"All of a sudden I'm a little worried, Bert," Lawler growled. "About the Big Pill. Maybe Lauren is half right about its been so dangerous. After all it has never been tested on a large scale before. And there are two hundred people here on Titan. Well, you know what's got to be done now. When you get to the *Prometheus,* tell Doc Kramer that I'm squeezing my thumbs . . ."

Lawler sounded almost plaintive at the end.

Bert felt the tweak of that same worry, too, but his course was set. He grinned in

the darkness that surrounded them.

"Nuts!" he said. "Even Lauren admits that everything is a gamble, remember? And you can pile all of the people into the space ship here in camp, and blast off with them, and hover at a safe distance from Titan till we're absolutely sure. I'd better hurry now, Lawler. Lauren's cops'll be on my tail any second. Gotta go."

"With your wife along?" Lawler demanded.

"Sure," Bert answered. "Allie's a fine shot with a blaster. Often I wish she wasn't such a good shot with her tongue. But I guess that with Lauren she cleared the atmosphere. Right, Allie?"

With a small hand on the shoulder of each man, Alice had been listening in. "I think so," she answered grimly. "Let's dash."

Ten seconds later Bert Kraskow and his wife went rocketing up into the weird and glorious Titanian night, which was nearing its end. They thought of Doc Kramer, the little physicist, waiting for them out in the desert, in the space ship, *Prometheus,* with its terrible and wonderful cargo. Bert thought, too, of his contact and contract with the new colonists' supply company, which was also called Prometheus. Yeah, Prometheus, the educator, the fire-bringing god of the ancient Greeks. The symbol of progress. At that moment Bert Kraskow felt very right. He'd been hired secretly to help carry the torch against the stiff and smug forces of conservative obstructionism, with its awkward and now antiquated methods.

Alice kept looking behind through the windows of the spaceboat's cabin. She spoke, now, with her helmet face-window open, for there was breathable air around them.

"I was thinking that Lauren might want us to run like this, Bert, so that we'd lead the cops to the hiding place of the *Prometheus.* So far there's no pursuit."

Bert growled, "I'm not worried that the Patrol boys won't be along. What really scares me is that some of Lauren's men may already have found the *Prometheus.* We'll just have to wait and see."

Beneath the spaceboat the desert rolled. Vast Saturn and his multiple moons, hung against the black and all-but-airless star-curtain. Then, all of a sudden, before the eastward hurtling craft, it was daylight, as the tiny sun burst over the horizon. Its wan rays fell on pale, stratified mists of air, all but frozen in the cold of night.

Those mists, cupped between the hills, were the last of Titan's atmosphere. Once, eons ago, when monster Saturn had been hot enough to supplement the far-off sun's heat with radiation of its own, those hills had been, for a few brief ages, verdant with primitive, mossy growths.

Bert followed the dry bed of an ancient river, till he came to the rocky cleft where the *Prometheus* had been concealed.

Just at they glimpsed the ship, Alice gave a sharp gasp, as they saw another spaceboat dart unhurriedly away. Bert landed in the rocky gorge, and on foot they approached the *Prometheus* cautiously, the blasters from the cabin of the spaceboat gripped in their gauntleted hands.

They found the ship's airlock securely bolted. But someone had tried to cut through its tough, heat-resistant shell with a blaster for the metal was still hot.

"A break," Bert breathed raggedly. "We got here just in time to scare them off . . . Hey! . . ."

That was when they found Doc Kramer. He lay behind a boulder, a pathetic little figure who seemed to be merely sleeping. There wasn't a mark on him that could be easily discovered. There was no time to figure out how he had died—by poisoned needle, overstrong paralyzer beam, or whatever. His body, within its spacesuit, was just beginning to develop rigor mortis.

Alice's eyes were wet, her small jaw set hard. "Your brother's death was at least an unintentional accident caused by carelessly made equipment, Bert," she said. "But Doc was murdered."

"Yeah," Bert grated thickly. "Only murder is awful hard to prove as far from civilization as this. Come on, we can't do a thing about it right now."

DOUBLE RAGE and grief drove him on toward what he must do with greater insistence than before. With a key from his hip-pouch, he opened the airlock of the *Prometheus.* With great caution they went inside but found no one in the ship.

The mood of its interior was brooding and sullen. Every cubic foot of space not

taken up by its machinery and fuel was packed with black ingots of an alloy, a large proportion of which was fissionable metal, quiescent now, and harmless, but under the right kind of primer, capable of bursting into a specialized hell of energy. Five thousand tons of the stuff, Earth-weight!

But even all this was the secondary part of the purpose for which the *Prometheus* had been fitted. Bert and Alice followed a narrow catwalk to a compartment along the keel of the ship which was fitted like a huge bomb-bay. And the monster that rested there, gripped by mechanically operated claws, would certainly have fitted the definition of a bomb as well as anything that had ever been made by Earth-science. Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb.

It was a tapered cylinder, a hundred feet long and thirty feet thick. For one grim, devilish moment Bert Kraskow paused to pat its flank, to feel the solid metallic slap of its tremendous shellcase under his palm, to be aware of the intricacies of its hidden parts: The forklike masses of fissionable metals that could dovetail and join instantly; the heavy-water, the lead, the steel, the beryllium.

Here was watchlike perfection and delicacy of mechanism—precision made to function faultlessly for but a fragment of a second, and then to perish in a mighty and furious fulfillment. Here was the thought of man crystallized—trying to tread a hairline past inconceivable disaster, to the realization of a dream that was splendid.

In that moment this thing seemed the answer to all the fury of wrong and sorrow that burned in Bert Kraskow. And the vision soared in his mind like a legend of green fields and light. For a few seconds he was sure, until doubt crept up again from the bottom of his brain, and until Alice put that uncertainty into words.

"Doc is gone," she said. "Even with his expert help, using the Big Pill would be taking a chance. Bert, do you think we can do it alone? Will it be all right? Are you certain, Bert?"

Her large, dark eyes pleaded for reassurance.

He sighed as the strain plucked at his nerves, in spite of what he knew of Doc Kramer's careful small-scale tests. Maybe what he felt was just a normal suspicion of anything so new and so colossal.

"No, Allie, not *absolutely* certain," he replied. "But how can anybody ever be sure of anything unless they try it? Doc died for an idea that holds tremendous hope for the good of all people who make their living in space. He was the principal inventor, and much more than just the boss of a new company. We aren't going to let him down. What we're going to do is for Nick, and for everybody who ever died violently on near-dead worlds. Lauren, and what he stands for, won't stop us. We can radio another warning and instruct everyone on Titan to blast off for a while."

Alice seemed to draw confidence from her husband's words. She smiled a bit wanly. "Okay, Bert," she said. "This is also for the folks who have gone nuts, or have just gotten terribly homesick from seeing too much black sky of space for too long. Let's go!"

They strapped themselves to the seats in the *Prometheus'* control room. Bert depressed the throttle. Rocket jets flamed. The rebuilt freighter lifted heavily and gained momentum toward a speed of miles per second. In the rear-vision screen the Kraskows saw two police spaceboats flashing the blue signal for them to land.

Bert set the *Prometheus* in an orbit around Titan, about a thousand miles above the bleak and dried out surface of this Saturnian satellite. Thus the ship became a little moon of a moon.

Alice was shouting into the mike of the large radio transmitter: "Colonists at Camp Titan! Enter your ship! Blast into space for safety! We are about to use the Big Pill! Colonists at Camp Titan! Blast for safety! . . . Police boats, give us room! Don't interfere! . . ."

This was the start of wild drama. When Alice switched from transmission to reception, the calls from the patrol craft were stern: "Freighter *Prometheus*, this is the Space Patrol. Proceed to a landing or we blast."

But these calls still seemed secondary, compared to other words also coming from the receiver, like another, overlapping radio program. It was Trenton Lauren's scared voice that spoke:

"Space Colonists' Supply, Incorporated,

calling deep-space units of patrol! Send more help to Titan! Maniac named Kraskow amuck with freighter *Prometheus,* known to contain huge bomb! Destroy on sight: Bomb supposed to be invention of group headed by one, Emil Kramer, renegade scientist believed to have a grudge against S. C. S. Claims for invention wholly extravagant and unbased. Hurry, deep-space units of Patrol. More help! Or all of Titan will be flooded with heat and deadly radioactivity! Hurry . . . Hurry . . . Hurry . . ."

Just then the *Prometheus* rocked from the impact of a blaster-beam; and though the Kraskows could not see the effect of the weapon, they knew that there were glowing spots on their ship's tough hull. If the Patrol boats could bear down with their beams on a particular area for a few seconds, a mighty episode could end violently before it had a chance to start.

Alice's small hands were on the complicated aiming and firing mechanism of the heavy blaster, mounted externally on the hull of the *Prometheus.*

"I'll keep the cops at a distance with a few near-misses," she said. "Maybe they aren't too anxious to take the chance of setting off the Big Pill, anyway. Let me worry about them, Bert. Just do what you've got to do . . ."

They had shut off their radio. There was no need to listen to the somewhat hysterical repetitions of what had come through before.

Every few moments there was a burst of humming sound as Alice fired. Bert put additional power into the rockets to surpass fixed orbital speed; but he held the ship to a tight curve around Titan. It was best to cover distance as quickly as possible. In his speeding course, he passed almost over the camp. But his purpose was to bomb a point at antipodes from it, halfway around this Saturnian moon.

UNDER full acceleration, the *Prometheus* was soon nearing this destination. To allow for the Big Pill's forward motion, imparted to it by the ship's velocity even after release, he pressed the lever that opened the bomb-bay doors, and then jabbed the single button that controlled both release, and the firing of the gigantic missile's own propulsive jets. Without those jets, considering the centrifugal force of its vast velocity in a circular path around Titan, much overbalancing the feebler gravitational pull of the moon, it could not have started its fall at all. It needed jets to drive it down.

Bert jabbed the button with his eyes closed since he had no precise target to hit. His teeth were gritted.

With the sudden loss of mass, the ship lurched. Bert had to struggle for a moment to adjust the angle of its flaming stern-jets, and bring it back on course. In another few seconds he cut the stern-jets out entirely, and opened the fore-nozzles wide to check excess speed, and reestablish the *Prometheus* in a stable orbit around Titan. One that could last forever without additional thrust.

"Well, the Big Pill is on its way—for better or worse," Alice remarked. "Half of our job is done."

But time had to pass before that metal colossus could drive itself and fall the thousand miles to the bleak, dried-out hills below. And the space ship hurtled on, to leave the point of coming impact far beyond the horizon. This, the Kraskows knew, was fortunate for them. The solid bulk of Titan would be the shield between them and holocaust. No human eyes could have looked directly on such a holocaust, at a range of a mere thousand miles, and not be burned from their sockets.

Bert and Alice noticed that the Space Patrol craft were no longer pursuing them. Alice switched on the radio again but only jangled sounds came through.

"Now for the last half of our job, Allie," Bert said. "First we attach shoulder-pack jets to our spacesuits."

This was accomplished a few seconds before the stupendous flash of the Big Pill's explosion blazed beyond the horizon. The dark curve of Titan's bulk was limned against thin white fire that streamed outward toward the stars like comet's hair. The spectacle looked like a much-enlarged color-photo of a segment of a solar eclipse. The glare on the other side of Titan was so intense and far-reaching that the night-portions of huge Saturn and his other satellites, and the shadowed part of the fabulous, treasure-filled Rings, all hundreds of thousands of miles away, registered an easily

perceptible flicker. But in airless space, of course, no sound was transmitted.

Alice's face went pale. Bert did not stop doing what must be done—adjusting the timing system in the black case beside his pilot seat, and looking with a final, intense glance along the cable which led back through the hull of the ship to a silvery, pipelike thing around which the thousands of tons of sinister black ingots were stacked. It was the primer-cap of another kind of subatomic fury.

About the white fire beyond the horizon, hardly dimming at all after its first dazzling flash, neither Alice nor Bert said anything. Maybe their awe and concern were too great. But already long fingers of incandescent gases were jetting and flowing over the hilltops, as if to catch up with the speeding ship.

Bert Kraskow knew pretty well what was going on where the Big Pill had struck the crust of Titan. First, there had been that stupendous blast. Then, inconceivable blue-white incandescence, like the heart of a star, began gnawing more gradually into the walls of the gigantic crater that had been formed. A chain-reacting process was now spreading through the silicates and other components of Titan's crust. It was a blunt and terrible inferno.

But to the scientist's view, chemical compounds were being broken apart; atoms were being shattered, and recast in new forms, as floods of neutrons, and other basic particles raced like bullets through their structure. On a small scale, here was something that was like the birth of the universe.

Bert found his voice at last. "The ship is firm in its orbit around Titan, Allie. The primer is set for thirty minutes from now. And we're approaching position above camp again. So here's where we bail out."

The Kraskow's closed their helmet face-windows and jumped from the airlock together. Flame-propelled by their shoulder-pack jets, they darted downward toward the sad, rolling hills that curved away under the weak light of the distance-shrunken sun. It was hard to believe that eons ago, before most of Titan's air and water had leaked away into space, those hills had been green with life.

Even with an ugly, red-lit vapor pouring and spreading over the arc of Titan's edge, they thought of such things.

THEIR helmet radiophones were full of static from intense electromagnetic disturbances, so that it was hard to converse.

But presently Alice shouted: "Bert! It's funny that we don't see the ship from camp anywhere in space. They must have gotten our warning to blast off with everybody. Radio reception was clear as a bell, then! . . . Wait! Somebody's trying to call us now . . ."

Bert strained his ears to penetrate the scratchy noises thrown up by the atomic holocaust that he had set off, and hear the words spoken blurredly by a familiar voice:

". . . Bert . . . Alice . . . This is Lawler . . . Rockets of ship won't function . . . So . . . can't leave . . . camp . . . Two Space Patrol boats cleared Titan with some . . . women . . . Too small . . . few passengers . . . Most . . . stranded here . . . Bert—what? . . . I think . . . Lauren . . ."

The rest of the words were drowned in a cataract of static.

Bert gulped. His mouth tasted suddenly sour with near-panic. "Lauren," he grated, his voice like a file. "Again. It would be a long chance that the ship broke down just by coincidence. He doctored those rockets and probably got clear in his own spaceboat. Leave it to him to make the use of the Big Pill look like disaster. And it can be that, now, with people left in the danger zone, losing their heads, acting foolishly."

Bert felt much more than just bitter, furious chagrin. His fellow colonists might lose their lives. He was responsible. He had launched a gigantic experiment recklessly.

"All we can do is get back to camp as fast as possible," Alice shouted above the static. "Come on, Bert! Bear down on the jets!"

So they hurtled at even greater speed toward the surface of Titan below. Meanwhile, faintly luminous vapors continued to pour over the hills from the direction of the terrible glow that fringed the horizon. Minutes before they reached the ground, hot, dusty murk thickened around them. It blew against them like a devil's wind.

They began to use their jets to brake speed. The camp was all but lost to view in the thickening haze. They landed heavily a

mile outside it and went rolling for a few yards after the impact. Dazed, they staggered up.

For a while their impressions were blurred, as if they struggled through some murky, cobwebby nightmare. Once more on Titan, silent as death for unthinkable ages, there were howling wind-sounds that found their way to Alice and Bert dimly through their oxygen helmets. Often the hot blast bowled them over, but they arose and kept on toward camp.

Bert took a Geiger counter, pencil-size from his chest-pouch. In it, flashes of light replaced the ancient clicking. It flickered madly. This meant that outside their shielding spacesuits was radio-active death. The gases of the wind that howled around them, had been in part released from chemical compounds, but more had been transmuted from other elements of the rock and dust in the crust of Titan, in that atomic vortex where the Big Pill had struck. Those gases were so new that they were tainted with the fires of their birth—saturated with radioactivity.

"It's nothing that we didn't expect, Allie," Bert grated into his helmet-phone, as if to reassure himself as well as his wife. "We knew beforehand."

His arm was around Alice, supporting her unsteady steps. Through blowing clouds of dust and gas that had surpassed hurricane force, they reached camp. Through the murk they saw that the wind had flattened and scorched every airdome. But there was no one in sight.

"The people must be inside the ship!" Alice shouted. "Even if it can't fly, it can protect them! There it is, undamaged! . . ."

"Yeah," Bert agreed, but he knew that her cheerfulness was a little like grabbing at a straw.

Then Alice had another thought. "By now there isn't anymore Space Ship *Prometheus,*" she said. "It has melted to a globe of incandescent metal, kept hot by a slow atomic breakdown in its substance. But it's sticking to the same tight orbit around Titan."

They hadn't seen it happen because by then the *Prometheus* had passed beyond the horizon. But the globe would circle Titan and return.

Alice kept trying to be cheerful. Bert felt a flicker of that same mood when he said, "Sure, Allie." But then his mind dropped the subject of the *Prometheus.* For there was too much terrible uncertainty and human confusion to be dealt with.

Bert led Alice to the small, seldom-used airlock near the stern of the camp ship. He had a logical hunch that Lawler would be waiting just inside to tell them what the situation was on board.

The hunch proved true. The lock's inner door slid aside stiffly and there was Lawler, a finger to his lips.

Quickly the Kraskows removed their radioactivity-tainted space-suits. Bert spoke softly.

"Well, Lawler, how do the gases that are spreading over Titan test out chemically?"

"As was expected, Bert. Plenty of nitrogen. Some helium. Plenty of hydrogen. A lot more oxygen. So that, as all of the hydrogen burns—combines with it to form water-vapor—there still will be lots of oxygen left over, floating free. Of course these gases are still so radioactive that half a lungful would kill. Only time will tell if Doc figured things straight. By the way, where is he?"

"Dead," Bert answered. "Murdered."

Lawler's lip curled, but he showed no surprise. "Uhunh," he grunted. "We can't prove the sabotage of this ship's rockets, either. When we tried to take off they just fizzled out their insides."

Then Lawler's eyes gleamed. "But," he said, "I foresaw funny business, so I doctored the jets of Lauren's private spaceboat as a precaution. He's still here with a couple of his stooges. He just about had hysterics when the space cops couldn't find room for him. He's been yelling accusations and promises of court action ever since while trying to repair his spaceboat."

"How are the colonists taking what happened?" Bert cut in.

Lawler shrugged. "Not bad. Not good. What you'd expect. Lots of those people are new to space. That was hard to take in itself. Add some messy deaths, and now this. And with Lauren yelling—well—plenty of them don't like us."

"Did anybody get hurt, yet?" Bert demanded.

"Not yet. Want to see the bunch?"

"Sure," Bert answered.

HE THRUST Alice behind him as they approached the main lounge of the ship where most of the colonists were assembled.

Trenton Lauren's voice burst on his ears. "There he is! Kraskow, I'll see that you spend your life in prison! A Patrol ship is coming out from Mars right now to get you! You may even hang! Out there in camp are ten million dollars' worth of equipment—property of my firm—which has been destroyed by your malicious action. And you've made a whole world useless for colonization for centuries to come! It's poisoned with radioactivity! Maybe we'll all die! Do you hear me, Kraskow? Die!"

Bert Kraskow moved quietly forward, past faces that glowered at him. Then he struck. There was a vicious thud. Lauren went down, drooling blood, his eyes glazed. Bert did not lose a motion as he stepped forward, and laid Lauren's two henchmen low with equal dispatch.

Minutes passed before the trio was awake again. Before Lauren could spout more venom, Bert stopped him with a growl. "Get out of my sight," he said. "Say another word and you'll get more of what you just got."

They went, Lawler following to watch out for possible mischief.

"None of us are hurt, yet," Bert told those near him, "though some things have gone wrong. Let's sit tight and see how matters turn out."

As he looked around him Bert felt that most of the colonists didn't really care to listen to him. Maybe you couldn't blame them. They'd all heard and seen too much. And, in a sense, Bert felt little different than they did. There was fear in him, and tension. He had released a colossus. Calculations and minor tests might call it a genie of benevolence. But this remained still unproven.

Outside, the wind howled, making the ship quiver. The glow from the Big Pill continued to paint the now murky sky. Bert and his wife waited grimly and silently in the lounge with the others. Hours passed without much change. Once, briefly, it was red-lit night. Then this changed for a while to daylight that was blurred, but far stronger than that to which a Saturnine moon was accustomed.

A little later Lawler came back to the lounge. "Trenton and his bums got their spaceboat patched up," he announced. "I watched 'em do it. They went out protected by spacesuits, of course. They did a botch job, but I guess it'll hold. Now they're taking off."

Through the leaded glass of the window-ports, the colonists watched the craft vanish into the steam-filled wind.

A minute later disaster struck the colonists.

The explosion was not heavy against the roar of the storm, but a jagged hole, a yard across, was ripped in the ship's hull. Into the hole rushed the hot, radioactive wind. Automatic safety doors failed to close properly. Maybe they had been sabotaged, too, by Lauren.

Many of the colonists were wearing spacesuits. They were the lucky ones, only having to slam their face-windows shut to be protected sufficiently from radiation. The others had to scramble to armor themselves. Bert and Alice Kraskow, and Lawler, had been outside. The outer surfaces of their suits had been contaminated, so they had had to remove them inside the ship to avoid tainting their surroundings. And in the press of events they hadn't thought to put on other spacesuits.

In the lounge and elsewhere, fastened against the walls, were such armor for emergency use. Bert tried to help his wife get into one. But she ordered sharply: "I can do this! Take care of yourself, Bert."

He didn't do that. Nor did Lawler. They ran down a passage toward the rent in the ship, intent on stopping the gases that were flooding the craft's interior. Seconds were important. The radioactive wind, much cooled during the long journey from its point of origin, but poisoned by invisible emanations, struck their unprotected bodies. Yet they kept on. They dared not breathe or speak; still they worked together with an efficiency of terrible need, stepping over the forms of men who had already fallen.

Bert found a flat sheet of metal to use as a patch. He fitted it over the rent, and, while Lawler piled boxes of supplies against it to hold it in place, sealed the edges with a thick, tarry substance.

When the job was done they staggered back to the lounge. Blotches of color danced

before their vision. Many corpuscles in their blood had already been destroyed by radiation. They sank to the deck.

BERT had a jangled impression of Alice, now in a spacesuit, holding his head. He saw her lips mouthing endearments . . . Game little Allie . . . His mind wandered off. He was going to die. Maybe everyone on the ship was going to die. Lauren's last move had been meant to provide a real disaster, with many deaths! Prove the Big Pill a failure. Make sure that it would be banned for good by the Safe Products Approval Board. Put the stamp of crime on Doc Kramer, the gentle little scientist who had been murdered! And on him, Bert Kraskow. And where was the rat, Lauren? On his way to the colonized moons of Jupiter, or even Mars, yelling and accusing by radio all along the line?

As consciousness faded further, Bert stopped thinking unpleasant things. His mind drifted into Doc Kramer's dream—of the changes which would make the near-dead worlds of space really habitable and homelike, fit for human colonists. It was a beautiful, lost vision.

He was out cold, then, for several Earth-days, and only dimly aware for many days afterward. He knew that he was in the ship's sick-bay, and that Lawler and other men were there, too. He heard their voices, and his own, without remembering what was said. Alice often came to see him. Often he heard roaring, watery sounds, as of vast rains.

Gradually he came out of the dream-like period, learning of what had happened. Until the time when he walked from the sick-bay, unsteadily, but on the mend.

Alice, at his elbow, spoke: "It was like Doc Kramer planned, Bert, solving the hardest problem."

He knew what this meant. Transmutation, or any atomic process, must involve the generation of much radioactivity that can destroy life. In the Big Pill, the problem was to make all the atoms break, and rearrange their components into new elements as cleanly and sharply as possible, so that residual atomic instability—radioactivity, that is—would not linger for years, but would disappear quickly.

"Titan's new atmosphere is clean and breathable, now, Bert," Alice went on. "And likewise the radioactive poisons that made you and Lawler and the others very ill disappeared quickly from your bodies. However, two colonists were beyond saving."

Lawler was with the Kraskows. They went out of the ship without the cumbersome protection of spacesuits. A Space Patrolman hovered like a worried hawk, watching Bert, but the latter seemed not to mind.

Far above, replacing the hard stars and blackness of space, common to the firmaments of all dead and near-dead worlds, were great fleecy clouds and blue sky. The atmosphere, because of Titan's low gravity, was highly expanded and hence thin, but rich in oxygen. The breeze smelled cool and fresh. Overhead was a second sun, seemingly much larger in diameter than the distant central orb of the solar system. It crept with visible motion across the sky. It was the molten globe of what had been the *Prometheus* and its cargo, locked in its sub-lunar orbit around Titan. But it was calculated to provide sufficient warmth and light to a small world such as this, for ten Earth-years, without renewal.

Colonists were clearing away the wreckage of the now useless airdomes, and putting their cottages in order. But they still looked around in awe at the miracles that ended their space-nostalgia, making them feel truly at home here. Down in the valley there was even a great lake of rainwater from condensed steam—one of the end-products of the process that had gone on in the rocks of the great crater on the other side of Titan. That process had died to a sleepy smoking, now; but all over this moon of Saturn there were many lakes.

Big Lawler chuckled gleefully, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. "Rejuvenation of burnt-out spheres on a really progressive basis," he growled. "No obsolete, jury-rigged junk! Expensive? Sure! But we can pay for it! Out there are Saturn's metal-rich Rings!"

Bert was thinking that the same trick could be used on any world with enough gravity to hold down a respectable atmosphere. Half-dead Mars. Jupiter's four biggest moons. Some of the other satellites of Saturn. Mercury.

"The one thing that burns me is that my brother, Nick, and Doc Kramer, and those two colonists, had to die!" Bert grated. "Poor Doc. He was rich from the atomic engines he invented. And I knew long ago that, by his will, all his stock is to be put in trust for the welfare of spacemen and colonists. Should we feel glad or humble?"

Lawler's grin had become a snarl. "Damn Trenton Lauren!" he said.

Alice didn't exactly smile. "I should have told you before this," she offered seriously, "but death always upsets me. By radio report from a scouting Patrol boat an hour ago, Lauren and his stooges were found, smashed and burned in the crash of their craft a hundred miles from camp. Their half-repaired spaceboat killed them."

Bert and Lawler exchanged glances. Their anger faded.

"What's new from the Safe Products Approval Board, Allie?" Lawler asked at last. "You seem to find things out fast."

"Nothing new," she answered. "The latest messages are much the same as those from a while ago. Guarded enthusiasm, and the statement that an okay for the Kramer Methods must be withheld pending complete and prompt investigation. Can't blame them. Caution is important."

"Maybe, if you played your cards right, you could become the new president of the Prometheus outfit, Bert," Lawler kidded.

But the possibility was certainly there. Bert was proud of what he'd done. Prometheus owed him plenty. Still, looking across camp past cottages and shops to the red mud of the once-dry, frigid hills, and down to the blue lake in the valley, reflecting sky and clouds, he knew that his heart was here in this crescendoing colonial scene. Somewhere a circle-saw screamed. From the metals-shop came the clanging of a mechanical hammer. These were sounds of a great future here.

"Nuts, pal," Bert chuckled to Lawler. "I'll leave the official pencil-pushing to the lab experts. The building and progress are here. You and Allie and I will all be back on Titan very soon."

These three began to be aware that a crowd of still befuddled but happy colonists were gathering around them. Another Space Patrol man approached, and said very officially:

"Mr. and Mrs. Kraskow, and Mr. Lawler: Our large ship leaves for Earth in five hours. Be ready to blast off. As you are aware, certain still valid charges were lodged against you by Trenton Lauren. You used dangerous equipment, not yet legally approved. As you are also aware, you must go to answer these charges. Sorry. But we of the Patrol know the score. In the face of your success I'm sure that this is mere red tape."

Bert scowled until he saw the cop's sly grin.

"Worried?" Alice asked him, smiling. She was pretty. She had courage. She had everything.

"Worried?" Bert echoed. In general he approved the S.P.A.B. "How can we lose on this last gamble with all the cards stacked in our favor. We even win a needed short vacation on Earth!"

"What are you two gonna bring back for me?" an old man, grimed from the forges, demanded, grinning. It was old Stan Kraskow, who had buried his younger son in the camp cemetery.

"Hiyuh, Dad!" Bert greeted happily. "What'll we bring him, Allie?"

"Wildbirds, Pop," Alice answered, her eyes twinkling. "You always liked wildbirds. No world is complete without them."

Bert noticed that the gardens of the camp, planted weeks ago under airdomes that were now being cleared away, were now showing a faint green. The beginning of a new and verdant Titan.



The SLAVES of VENUS

By EDWIN JAMES

They overthrew him on Earth. They booted him out of Mars. So wily Alex Dekker rocketed his peculiar brand of freedom to the swampmen of Venus . . . and prayed for one unholy miracle.

THROUGH the thin, cold upper atmosphere of Venus, above the clouds, a bulky object fell toward the distant surface. It tumbled over and over, straightened, and tumbled again, a dull-black oddly-shaped thing, only faintly visible in the light of the burning sun.

Its speed was too slow for a meteor, and the shape was all wrong. There were projections, some round or oval, some long and pillar-like.



Occasionally a short, bright burst of flame would shove the object in one direction or another. It was in free fall, from a distance of several hundred thousand feet, with nothing visible to stop the descent short of the jagged peaks below the clouds.

The clouds were close, puffy, thick and white, wet and without break anywhere. The object was plunging, madly and without reason. Then, a long blast of flame downward and a blossoming puff of white that merged, almost instantly, into the surrounding clouds . . .

A one-man reconnaissance ship trailed its flaming tail in the tops of the towering swamp trees. Between the tops of the trees and the billowing lower reaches of the clouds there was five thousand feet of clear air, never any more. The sparks from the exhaust sputtered in the moisture laden leaves and went out. The ship fled on.

The man inside, cramped into a reclining position with only one small porthole forward for visibility, sighed as he saw the lofty towers of the swamp city rise above the distant trees, thick gray fingers clutching at the eternally hidden sky. He nursed the ship gingerly between the surrounding trees, through the buildings, and into the large square in the very center of the city. The ship squealed to a stop on tortured runners.

The top of the ship was released and pushed back; the man stood up, stretched, and looked around. A crowd of green-faced, goggle-eyed citizens gaped at him from a safe distance. The man ignored them.

Finally, through the crowd, a white Earthman threaded his way.

"You took your time," said the pilot.

"Didn't expect you, Alex," said the other. "And certainly not like this."

"The forward jets were damaged by gunfire when we left Mars. We crashed in the mountains to the north. I came for help."

"I'll get a rescue party started," the man said anxiously, turning to go.

"Wait!" said Alex. "We can't take time for that. Have to get things cleaned up in a hurry. I have reason to suspect there may be complications if we delay."

"But your daughter . . . !" began the other and stopped.

"Yes?" Alex said coldly.

The man gathered together his courage.

"The Kalja. They'll be attacking the ship now. I understood your daughter was coming with you."

"She did come with me," Alex said without emotion. "Only one person could leave. I was more valuable. Sentiment cannot be allowed to get in our way; the work comes first."

Alex mopped the perspiration from his face.

"This heat is unbearable after Mars."

He started to turn away but stopped, impatiently, at the incredulous expression on the other's face.

"Very likely," he said, "they'll be able to hold out . . ."

THE MOUNTAINS were cold. Moisture collected on the peaks that were eternally buried in the cloud formations, trickled down the bare, rocky slopes to form rampaging torrents in the deep-cut gorges. Eventually those swelling rivers poured out into the stinking swamps of the lowlands and finally into the huge, dark, sullen seas.

Rock slides were common. Huge segments of the mountains, weakened by cold and the unending drip of the water, cut their way with unstoppable force into the valleys. They formed lakes behind them until, eventually, they were washed away again.

The space ship lay halfway up a peak, its nose crumpled against the side of the mountain. On either side the ground sloped off and the attackers had difficulty approaching the ship without being picked off. They didn't seem to mind the danger. They tried a rush now and then, and when that failed against the spitting flame from the gun-ports of the wrecked ship they retired to a safer position to wait. They were patient.

They were huge, hairy men, six and a half to seven feet tall, with flat, lean bellies and flanks swelling to heavily muscled barrel chests and shoulders a yard across. One had to hit them in the head or the heart to stop them. Anywhere else and they went on unconcernedly with what they were doing.

The crewman in the ship shook his head disgustedly as he pumped charge after charge into the still crawling figure of one of the attackers.

"What's the use?" he said. "They'll get us eventually."

it from down the trail. It swarmed forward, its great arms spread out with long, wicked claws gleaming with ivory brightness, its massive jaw hanging open and dripping saliva, its little eyes red and savage.

AN INSTINCT threw the man to one side as the bear rushed past; it brushed against him with sufficient force to knock him to the rocks by the side of the trail. He lay there for a moment, stunned, on the edge of the precipice that dropped straight down, hundreds of feet to the rocks and raging water of the river below.

It must have been only seconds he was out, for when he got to his knees, shaking his head to clear the fog away, the bear was only just turning, searching for him. He pulled the foot-long, razor-sharp knife from its sheath at his side and wished he had a blaster. But he couldn't bring in foreign weapons, he told himself. The Kalja were funny that way.

The bear had spotted him. It was swaying from side to side, building up its rage at the intrusion of this smooth-skinned creature. The creature stepped forward, advancing toward it. That was unbearable; the bear lowered its head and charged.

As the bear almost reached him, the man stepped aside, escaping the deadly arms by inches and struck a savage blow into the hairy back, slicing deeply. The bear roared as he turned, quicker this time, and the sound rolled back and forth across the canyon in near stunning intensity. Again the bear charged and again the man dodged aside.

The bear was smarter this time. One arm swept around in a glancing back-hand blow that would have crushed had it landed squarely. It would not have touched him at all had his foot not turned on a loose rock. The blow fell, and the man was tossed, stunned, to the edge of the precipice.

The bear turned, slowly, warily, looking around for its quarry. Finally he spied it, lying in a heap along the trail. The bear charged, his arms spread wide, ready to claw the object to its huge chest in a bone-breaking embrace. The man stirred uneasily, instincts of self-preservation striving to rouse the half-conscious body. In a moment it would be too late.

As the bear, paused, hesitated above his prey, a loud, savage shout split the air. Before the bear could turn, a body was clinging to his back, his neck encircled by a hairy arm, a hand wielding a long blade stabbing at his chest. The bear roared and whirled, trying to shake the clinging being from his back. It was still there, clinging, stabbing pain. It was yelling in his ear, taunting him.

The bear fell forward onto his front paws, shook, heaved. Finally he rolled over, got up quickly. The clinging thing was gone. Instead there was a hairy thing, standing on two legs, facing him. The bear roared and started forward. The thing stepped in quickly, stabbed, and got away before he could grip it. He rushed again; again it got away.

The third time it was not so lucky. One lucky blow caught the thing on the back and hurled it away. The bear started after it.

The other man had come awake and had watched the last few seconds of the fight, which now appeared to be approaching an end.

The bear was ready to destroy its annoyance, towering over it as it crouched, trying to get away and upright. The man on the edge of the precipice raised himself, drew his arm back, and threw. The knife flew straight and hard, sticking hilt-deep into the bear's chest.

The bear stood up with a grunt of surprise and clawed at this new object, and then the hairy thing was upon it, slicing, stabbing. Confused, bleeding from a dozen wounds, the bear blinked once—and died.

There was silence on the trail.

The hairy man looked down at his kill and then over at the man half sitting at the cliff's edge. His forehead wrinkled in indecision; he stared at the knife-hilt protruding from the bear's chest and wrinkled up again.

The other got up carefully, slowly. He moved a few steps forward. Then he spoke in the Venusian mountain dialect.

"Friend," he said. "Friend. You save me."

At once, like a child's, the hairy one's face cleared.

"Friend," he agreed. "No. Brother. We kill together."

He pointed to the bear, but his face was troubled.

"You," the man said. "You killed the bear."

The hairy man grinned happily. He pulled the other's knife from the bear's chest, wiped it clean, and handed it, hilt first, to his new friend. Then he set to work, hacking off the bear's paws. When he was finished he looked up and handed one paw to the other. The man shook his head, indicating that he should keep them both. Happily the hairy man tied them on either end of a cord and hung the cord around his neck.

"I am Brun of the tribe of Calg," he said finally.

"I am Paul," the other answered. "No tribe."

"No tribe?" Brun said in surprise. "All Kalja have a tribe."

"I am not of the Kalja."

"You are not Laja. What are you?"

"I am a friend."

The other smiled.

"Yes, a friend," said Brun, and then his face clouded. "But I cannot take you to my tribe."

"We will face that later."

Brun nodded uncertainly.

"I killed a bear," he said happily. "Now I can take my place with the men."

Paul stared in surprise at the seven feet of bulging muscle standing over the remains of a savage, almost-unkillable cave bear. It had been killed by a boy.

"Most of the men are fighting against a foreign object which fell from the sky not far from here. I could not go because I had not killed a bear. In the tribe of Calg you are not a man until you have killed a bear all alone." The boy smiled proudly. "Today I did."

"That is good, brother," said Paul.

Brun smiled and began gathering material for a fire. When he had a pile of dry wood, which had been protected from the constant drip of the clouds by caves or the overhanging cliff, he set about carving two huge, dripping steaks.

As they were eating, Brun looked up suddenly in distress.

"Brother," he said. "Calg will kill you if I take you back with me."

"Even a friend?" Paul asked softly.

"The Kalja have no friends. Other tribes are enemies. All enemies."

"We must do something about that."

"Nothing can be done! That is the way it is. That is the way it has always been. Calg will kill you."

"I wonder," said Paul, musing. "I wonder . . ."

THE TRIBE OF CALG lived in small stone houses huddled under the protection of an overhanging cliff and protected on the other side by a sheer descent of several hundred feet to a roaring river below. Brun plodded along the narrow trail which was the only entrance to the tribe's living area. By his side, Paul, overshadowed by almost a head, moved lithely and smoothly, his eyes roving, noting everything.

Paul saw the sentinel before he could shout a warning to the tribe below. His silken movement was unchanged as the huge hairy men came hurtling forth to meet them, but Brun glanced around uneasily and his steps became uncertain.

"Brothers," he called, "it is Brun."

The group of hairy men stopped uncertainly, facing them and fingering the hilts of their knives. Finally a grizzled oldster, his muscles huge and knotted, stepped forward with authority.

"We see it is you, Brun," he said. "But who is this smooth-skinned stranger?"

Paul smiled slightly; in the Kalja the words stranger and enemy are synonymous.

Brun cast one indecisive look behind him and then turned to face his tribesmen without hesitation; with one speech he hazarded his life and, what probably meant more to him, cast away his claim to a mature membership in the tribe.

Paul's heart beat faster. This, he thought, is Brun's real manhood; this is worth all my efforts.

"He is my brother," said Brun with dignity. "He saved my life. Together we killed a bear."

The men milled around, scratching their heads dubiously. Paul stepped forward, balancing himself on the balls of his feet, lightly.

"Take me to Calg!" he said.

That broke the dam.

"Let Calg decide," they agreed.

They hemmed them in, encircled them, led them along the path until it widened

"No talk like that," snapped the girl, swinging her knee-length skirt in a vicious circle. "My father will send help."

"With all respect to you, Miss Dekker," the crewman said bitterly, "I'd like to correct that statement. Your father will send help—if he wants to."

Miss Dekker frowned. The menace of her expression only emphasized the beauty of her ivory-white face and the stubbornness of her otherwise gently-rounded chin.

"Alex will send help," she said. Her tone said that there would be no argument. For emphasis she slapped the hand-weapon strapped to her waist which belied the feminine curve of her hips.

"Maybe we ought to surrender," suggested another crewman despondently. "We hold out for a week maybe, and what happens? We only make them madder. So we kill a few of them. That don't save us."

She turned on him savagely.

"You know the Kalja. They don't take prisoners any time. And if I hear any more talk of surrender you'll die sooner than you think."

Another crewman spoke up, this one older than the others, harder and wiser.

"See here, Miss Dekker," he said, slowly and easily. "You're new at this business. We aren't. We've been working for your father or men like him for ten years or more. They haven't been noteworthy for sentiment. If it suits their plans to rescue us they will; if it doesn't, or if something else seems more important, we'll just have to hold out here as long as we can and hope that we become more valuable. Meanwhile talk like yours ain't going to help any."

He turned his gaze on the other crewmen.

"On the other hand, Miss Dekker's right. The Kalja don't like strangers. They hate aliens worse than they hate the Laja, and that's saying some. They'd tear us to pieces with their bare hands before you could get out the first syllable of 'surrender.' I know. I fought 'em, five-six years ago. I've seen what they do."

A youngster spoke up eagerly.

"Maybe we could cut our way out and make a break for it."

The older man chuckled. It had an ugly sound.

"We'd have as much chance out there as you have of ever seeing Earth again."

The boy looked sick.

"They'd swarm down on us like gorillas. And even if we got through, by some unbelievable miracle, it's a thousand miles over the mountains and through the swamps. It ain't never been mapped. There's tribes of Kalja all over. And there's animals that don't like people any more than the Kalja and are lots bigger and tougher."

His smile was grim.

"Anybody want to try?"

Even among those hard, tough, battle-scarred men nobody moved, nobody said anything. The older man turned back to the girl.

"I guess we'll stay, Miss Dekker."

An odd smile curled her full red lips.

"You won't," she said easily, "unless you get back to your guns. There's another charge coming our way . . ."

A MAN, tall by earth standards but lacking half a head of reaching the heights of the Kalja, moved easily along a mountain trail. He was unlike the Kalja, too, in other respects. Instead of bulging muscles he had flat silken ripples under his skin, a skin which was bronzed but not as dark or hairy as the mountain natives.

It was all very odd. None but the Kalja and their only slightly wilder animal cousins lived long in the mountains. And this man with his cautious watchfulness that was not fear and his flowing grace that was not weakness looked like he might live a long time.

He wasn't handsome. In fact, he was ugly until one looked at his eyes and the sweep of his forehead. One kept returning to his eyes. They were bold and fearless, knowing and a trifle cynical—and they were kind, kind and generous, but it was as if those qualities were tempered with justice, unalloyed with maudlin sentiment or mistaken pity. One soon forgot everything but his eyes. He was above the beauty which is an accident of regularity and fashion. He was—himself. It was enough for most people. For the rest it was too much.

The eyes were watchful now, but even the most watchful of eyes could not have seen in time the blur of motion which was the cave bear, emerging enraged from its dark hole beyond an outcropping concealing

into a space before the largest of the stone houses.

"Calg!" one of them yelled. "Brun has brought us a stranger."

A huge, bull-headed man emerged blinking from the house. Among the towering Kalja, he was a giant. Beside him, their muscles seemed weak and small. Even Brun drew back a little at his lowering glance.

"A stranger!" Calg bit off the words. "Why do you bring him to me? Why do you not kill him at once?"

"He is a friend, a brother," Brun said.

"This smooth-skinned puny weakling!" Calg snorted. Then his expression changed for the worse. "He is a stranger. The Kalja have no friends."

Paul stepped forward, alone, into the cleared space. He was a youthful stripling beside the giant.

"Perhaps that is why the Laja beat you in your battles," he said slowly, letting it sink in. "I come in peace. I would stay here in peace." Paul read the sneer on Calg's face. "But, if necessary, I will take the leadership of the tribe from you in fair fight."

Calg roared with laughter, the others, except Brun, joining in appreciatively. Then Calg stretched his mighty frame.

"Clear a space," he bellowed. "I am going to break this puny fellow into small pieces and then throw those pieces over the cliff."

He unbuckled his knife from his side and threw it behind him; Paul did the same. Then the bull lowered his head and charged. Calg was quick in spite of his bulk. But Paul was lightning fast.

II

IN ONE FLUID movement Paul dodged aside, tripped Calg's churning feet, and buried his fist, wrist deep, into Calg's side beneath his ribs. Calg scrambled up, yelled, and charged again, watchful for any artful dodging. As Calg's flailing hands almost grabbed him, Paul ducked down and heaved his back up under Calg's chest which bent over him with the force of the rush. Calg sailed twenty feet through the air and lit heavily on his back.

This time Calg got up more slowly, aware that he was facing something new in fighting, slowly awakening to the fact that this comparatively slim body with its flat, silken muscles had the power to hurt. Calg advanced slowly, looking for an opening to launch a sledge-hammer blow or a chance to grab this stranger and break him.

Paul backed away from the giant, watching his eyes. A bare flicker of an eyelid warned him, and a ham-like fist went over his shoulder. Paul counter-punched with a right-handed blow that rocked Calg's head back on his shoulders. His left followed immediately like a piston into Calg's solar plexus. Then he was away, dancing beyond Calg's reach.

Calg shook his head and stalked forward. The crowd of huge hairy men and women which had been yelling furiously was now silent, watchful. Again Calg lunged; again Paul met him with rocking blows to that bull head and that barrel body. Calg brushed them away like insect bites.

In that pattern the fight went on and on for long minutes, Paul fully aware that if one of those sledge-hammer blows ever connected he would be out and over the cliff, broken, probably torn into pieces. He kept out of the way of them, watching Calg's eyes, lightly swaying on the balls of his feet and his toes. He hammered away at Calg's body and head, marking it, opening it up, with lightning blows that carried tremendous force behind them.

Calg grunted under them and moved in closer. One blow almost caught Paul, but he rolled with it so that it left only a slowly reddening spot on his body. Paul tried harder, hit harder, moving in dangerously close with his blows to have his body behind them. On and on the fight went, Paul hammering away, Calg moving in, unstoppable, unhurtable.

At last Paul's arms began to weary, his breath came short and fiery. Hours of fighting seemed to lie behind them. It was soon or never, he thought. Soon he would be too tired to stop that advance, too slow to dodge. He summoned his last reserves of strength and dodged quickly around Calg's slowly moving bulk. With all his force he brought the edge of his palm down on that bull neck. Calg turned slowly, his hands at his sides, his face a mask of rage. Paul waited for the blow that was to come; his last card had failed. Calg didn't move, his feet seem-

ingly planted in the ground. Comprehension dawned in Paul's eyes.

He stepped forward and brought his palm up, stiff-armed, under Calg's chin. Calg took two short steps backward and toppled to the ground. He lay there, his great length battered and bleeding, his limbs twitching slightly. Paul stood over him, unutterably weary. The tribe was still.

Brun stepped forward, knelt before Paul, and placed Paul's hand on his head. He got up and turned toward the tribe.

"Hail to Paul!" he shouted. "Hail to Paul, great warrior, great fighter, chief of the tribe of Paul!"

The tribe stirred. Then, one by one, they bowed before the incredible fact of Calg's defeat—Calg, who was not even killed.

"Hail to Paul!" they said, and knelt before Paul with his hand on their heads.

Paul, swaying with weariness, looked down in surprise at the last tribesman to kneel before him.

"Hail to Paul!" Calg said, and, looking up, grinned, an odd look on his savage, hairy, cut face. "You are a mighty fighter. You will be good for the tribe."

"Hear me!" said Paul, raising his hands. "I hereby declare that Brun has reached the state of manhood and will be accepted among the men and warriors of the tribe. And I name Calg leader when I am not here and Brun my lieutenant."

"We hear," murmured the tribe.

"Tomorrow," Paul said, his lithe, golden figure drooping, "tomorrow I will have more to say. Tomorrow the tribe of Paul will take a new path."

And the tribe of Paul watched as they saw their leader reel into Calg's former house and fall heavily to the floor.

"THERE is the foreign object," said Brun, pointing to the space ship, which still fired in desultory fashion at the crouching Kalja that crept ever closer.

"Do the men know?" asked Paul.

"Calg has told them. They have all sworn allegiance."

"No more charges," Paul said.

Brun nodded.

"They will wait for the signal?"

Brun nodded again. "You are the chief."

Paul looked down on the ship several hundred feet below the peak they were standing on. The clouds hovered only a few feet above their heads.

"There will be no killing when the ship is taken," Paul said.

Brun's face clouded.

"The tribe will be hard to stop. You do not know how they hate these foreign devils."

"You said I was chief."

"Yes, but . . . You do not know what these devils do! The Laja were bad enough before they came. They would sometimes make raids into our mountains and take off a few of our young men or children for slaves. They would not come often. But these white-faced foreign things came, and the Laja came oftener and oftener. They would carry off whole tribes, stunning them with their weapons, and put them to work in the lower hills or the swamps. Women and children, everyone. Do you know what they do to slaves? They torture them with the little sticks they have which tighten all the muscles into terrible knots. They work them night and day in the mines of the hills or the horrible muck of the swamps. The Kalja can only live a year or less in the swamps. They need the free air of the mountains."

Paul's gaze was fixed on Brun's impassioned face.

Brun said, "You wonder how I know all this, Paul. Look!" He pulled aside the leather covering his back.

His back was covered with tiny black holes, these overlaid with welts and ridges.

"I was taken to the mines when I was a boy. I saw the free Kalja dying all around me tortured by the green-faced Laja and the white-faced foreign devils, but of the two the foreign devils are the worst. Finally I escaped and made my way back to the tribe."

Brun's face softened.

"I will not kill, if you say so, Paul," he said, "but these others will not stop if ever they get a chance. They have never had a chance like this to get at the foreign things. Never has a ship been captured, even if crashed. They will be hard to stop."

"Save what you can then, Brun," Paul said softly. "When the final attack comes, go with Calg and save as many as possible."

"Yes, Paul," said Brun.

Paul looked around the plateau they had climbed up to so dangerously on the other side from the ship. Great boulders strewed the relatively flat area. A thin drizzle of rain was falling on them.

Carefully Paul sighted down the side of the peak falling away to the ship below and marked a spot on the very edge of the plateau.

"Roll those rocks to this spot," he told Brun.

Together they heaved at the boulders, some of them weighing close to a ton and rolled them to the position marked. Soon they had a huge pile teetering on the rim above the ship.

Paul sighted again.

"Now!" he said, and together they pushed.

With a warning rumble, the rocks started down the hill, one after the other, picking up speed. They leaped and bounded with growing momentum, but their force was not what Paul was counting on. Gradually the vibration of their fall loosened the rock they were rolling down. A few dribbles of dust and small stones started here and there. Then, with a sigh, a huge side of the peak sloughed away and started in unstoppable fury down upon the ship beneath.

It picked up speed, grew, a tremendous avalanche of rock. The blow it struck the ship was not a square one; otherwise the ship would have been buried, crushed. Instead the slide crushed more of the nose, rocking the ship back and forth in wild gyrations. Loose boulders hammered all the exposed area of the ship, crushing gun ports, battering the ship from stem to stern.

With a wild yell, the Kalja rushed.

"Now, Brun," said Paul, and turned away.

Brun slithered and wormed his way down the side of the peak. The crippled ship was smothered with the huge savage bodies of the Kalja, ripping, tearing at the gun ports and the holes smashed in the hull. There was a roaring cacophony of sound, bloodthirsty and unquenchable. At last an opening was made in the ship.

The Kalja swarmed into the interior. Brun crushed his way in among the last. There was a brief sound of hand guns, several gurgling screams, and silence.

The Kalja do not torture.

BRUN stood in the doorway, his head hanging.

"Well?" said Paul quietly.

"I have failed you, Paul," Brun said sadly. "I could not stop them. Calg and I tried, but there were too many."

"You did your best," Paul said.

"Only. . . ."

"Only what?"

"Only there was one we managed to get away. The foreign thing is not much. It is something. We brought it to you."

There was a gentle light in Paul's eyes as he glanced up from his stone couch covered with furs.

"You have done well, Brun. Send him in."

Brun's head lifted in pleasure. He reached behind his back. With roughness due more to his overpowering strength than to his wish, he pushed the white-skinned creature into the room and turned away.

Paul's expression didn't change but he felt his pulse pick up.

The foreign thing was a girl, a ragged girl, towsled, tangled, dirty. But behind the dirt gleamed the beauty of an ivory skin and features perfect and gently molded. The tangled locks of hair were blue-black and long; they would be shiny and soft if brushed. And the ivory promise of her face was even brighter in the soft, feminine, full-formed curves of her body that peeped through the tatters of her clothes.

Now the face was not so pretty. It was dark with anger, lined with rage, misshapen in the firm, stubborn lines of her chin and jaw. There was no surprise in that face, either, as her eyes took in the presence of an Earthman in the house of the chief of the tribe.

"Renegade!" she spat out.

Paul smiled.

"Think what you will, Miss Dekker," he said.

This time her jaw dropped.

"How did you know my name?" she gasped.

"I know your father well, and I took the trouble to acquaint myself with all his friends and relatives."

She recovered her poise and anger.

"Then you know what will happen to you when my father catches up with you," she said bitterly.

"I know what will happen to your father."

"How can you stand yourself, associating with these murderous animals, these beasts who look like a horrible parody of man! Or maybe you incite them?"

"I am their chief, Miss Dekker."

"You vile scum!" she spat out.

"Your opinion of me is immaterial," Paul said slowly. "But you should not misunderstand the Kalja. They are a free, noble people, simple, almost childlike, in their tastes and customs, but they have respect for one another. They do not kill without reason or steal or cheat. They do not lie or enslave other peoples. Their wives and children are always treated kindly and lovingly. If they are unfriendly it is because of the circumstances of their lives."

She sneered her disbelief.

"If you once win their affection and trust, they will never desert you, no matter how low you sink. They are, all in all, infinitely better than the slave-seeking Laja and much better than our race, Miss Dekker."

"I suppose that is why they kill any stranger on sight. I suppose that is why they attacked my ship and tore my crew limb from limb before my eyes." She covered up those eyes and shuddered.

"The Laja and men like your father have taught them what it is to hate," Paul said. "They have raided them, enslaved them, tortured them, and now they are trying to exterminate them."

She flared up.

"It isn't true. My father is trying to unify Venus, make it strong enough to resist the tyranny which has seized Earth and Mars."

"Your father is trying to unify Venus under himself—and by wiping out all opposition. He can rule the Laja, but the Kalja will have no master, now or ever. He must wipe them out."

"All measures are justified for freedom," she said proudly. "And the Kalja would be no great loss."

Paul got to his feet, easily, gracefully. For the first time Alice Dekker realized the lean, flat-muscled, golden beauty of his body. He took a step toward her. She backed away in spite of herself. Then she looked into his eyes. She had never seen eyes like his. She stared into them and wondered.

"You realize you are at my mercy, Miss Dekker," he said.

She tore her eyes away.

"I expected that would be your level," she said bitterly, trying, futilely to close the gaps in her clothing.

"You will not leave this house," he said. "While you are here you are safe. Outside the Kalja might forget themselves at the sight of a white-skinned devil."

She scoffed at his excuses.

"As you said, I'm at your mercy."

The luminescent clouds were fading into darkness beyond the doorway as Paul approached her. There was something magnetic about his nearness. Alice felt alternately attracted and repelled, but at the same time rooted to the spot by some hypnotic force.

"Go to the bed," Paul said slowly.

Disobedience was in her mind, rebellion in her heart, but suddenly, without volition, Alice found herself beside the bed, trembling. She was angry with herself, but she was even angrier when she saw Paul collect several fur robes from a hook on the wall, spread them in front of the doorway, and stretch himself out upon them.

For a long time after Alice threw herself upon the bed there was silence in the darkness. Finally, the girl, commanding all her bitterness, spoke savagely.

"I suppose you think you're being very noble?"

Silence was the only answer. Alice spoke more bitterly.

"If you were really noble you would see that I got back to my father."

From the doorway came the sound of a gentle snore.

Alice cried herself to sleep and wondered why she cried.

III

IN THE swamp city the Laja were busy. The streets were crowded with green-faced creatures scurrying in all directions, and the night echoed to their croakings. Along the great docks that projected forth hundreds of feet into the four-mile wide river myriads of small boats and barges were tied. Stevedores were loading them; machinists were tinkering with motors; the Laja were preparing their greatest attack.

In the great palace off the city's central

square, the activity was not so feverish, but there was an undertone of excitement. In the huge council chamber the small group of Earthmen and the handful of Laja were lost. Pinned to the back wall was a large, roughly-sketched map; upon it a plan of action was outlined in red, and colored pins dotted the mountain area in bewildering profusion.

Alex Dekker sat smoking, quiet, imperturbable, at the wide desk on the dais. Before him most of the Laja were seated; beside him Chester Griffith paced nervously. Around the wall and at the exits, the hard-faced Earthmen stood unobtrusively but watchful, their hand guns holstered but eased partly out.

"Is everything understood?" Alex asked.

The Laja nodded slowly, Griffith jerkily.

"Chet is to be in complete command and have under him the main force going up the principal tributary," Alex ran over quickly. "Allan, with his group, will swing off to the right on his branch, John to the left on this one. All Kalja, men, women, and children, will be wiped out as encountered. Those hills must be swept clean."

The most imposing of the Laja arose.

"Once more I ask," he said, in his croaking speech, "why should not the Kalja be captured as formerly? If we wipe out the Kalja, who will work the mines?"

Alex smiled.

"Within a year enough machinery will be manufactured to more than replace the unwilling labor of the stupid mountain giants. As to the first question, all opposition must be wiped out immediately if we are to repel the attacks from Outside. We must be able to throw our undivided strength into the battle for freedom, without fear of a treacherous attack from the mountains."

"We can only take your word for there being an Outside," said the Laja leader. "Our histories say nothing of such a place, and we, ourselves, cannot understand or conceive of its existence."

The men along the walls gently eased their hands down toward their guns.

"You are here, however," the Laja went on, "as proof of your statements. We have cast in our lot with yours." He cast a glance from his bulging eyes to either side of the room, a glance that was practical, neither proud nor humble but conscious of the situation, and honorable with the honor of the businessman. "We cannot and will not withdraw now."

He sat down. The men along the walls relaxed. Alex smiled more broadly. He turned back to the map.

"Bill will take a small party and rescue the crew of the ship which crashed about here. It should still be holding out. Any questions?"

Griffith turned around quickly.

"It might be too risky," he said, quickly and nervously. "If the Kalja sweep down here suddenly the city will be undefended."

"Now Chet," Alex said soothingly, "the Kalja tribes will never combine. We will keep a guard here that will be more than enough for any single ambitious tribe."

"Suppose they destroy our barges," Griffith said. "We'll be trapped there. We'd never be able to get back."

"Guard them," Alex said simply, then his eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you'd rather I gave your job to one of the other boys."

"No—no, Alex," Griffith said hastily. "I just don't want to overlook any possibilities."

"Everything's settled then," Alex said, settling back. "Remember! Move fast. Strike hard. Move on, before the word can spread. Clean up everything."

He searched the faces of the assembled group.

"Meanwhile we here will be working on planetary defenses, setting up gun positions, building new guns, radar screens, rocket seekers, and building some new, small scouting ships."

He looked around the room again.

"All right," he said. "Get going."

The barges were loading at the docks. Long files of green-faced, armed, uniformed Laja streamed into the boats and sat silent in their positions. Only the croak of the officers commanding the loading broke the silence.

The delegation of Earthmen swung onto the dock, moving rapidly and in close formation. At the barges they broke up, stepped into their respective boats, and took their positions where they could watch everything ahead of them.

The green soldiers eyed them warily and edged away until the Earthmen were sitting alone. They didn't mind; in fact, they pre-

ferred it that way.

The engines started and began to mutter. Slowly the barges moved away from the dock and swung into the slow movement of the wide river. The deep brown, muddy river stank in the night. The boats churned it into chocolate froth. Finally the last barge slipped away in the darkness.

They were headed for the river's source. They were headed for the mountains.

THE silence was uneasy and unnatural. Alice Dekker, watching from within the shadow of the Chief's house, felt the tension, the powder-keg uncertainty, and shivered. Standing straight and still in front of the doorway, Paul knew what it was. He had felt it before, but never in so potent a form. It was suspicion, distrust, hatred, belligerence, prejudice, and fear for the new. It was a thing, alive. It must be killed with a quick, sharp blow, or it would turn into a ravening destroyer.

Alice shivered again as she watched the great, hairy Kalja standing tense and nervous in the cleared space between the house and the edge of the cliff, eyeing each other, fingering the hilts of their knives. A sudden wave of pity swept over her; Paul was a slim, shining, golden rapier among huge war clubs. His task was hopeless; he would break himself to pieces on the iron of their stubborn distrust.

Alice caught herself and repudiated her hasty emotions. It was nothing to her if Paul tried the impossible and failed. His motives were detestable, his actions evil, his goal unthinkable. Still, Alice crept a little closer to the door, her breath faster, her eyes troubled.

Paul studied the giant chiefs of the major tribes of Kalja assembled here in tradition-shattering conference. Never had they met, any two of them, without lowering their heads and charging with outraged bellows like bulls whose dominance of the herd is threatened. The mountain men were tribal men and any other moving creature was an enemy to be killed. Paul's recognition of this fact was reinforced by the bone-deep ache of his body from Calg's instinctive reaction to his presence.

Now there was no thought of forcing the issue by personal combat; that would only result in a shambles solving nothing. The chiefs had been brought together by Calg and Brun, precariously, by the presentation of pieces of the conquered space ship. How to hold them together, bind them together, was another problem. Would they ever be reconciled? Paul wondered, and hazarded his life, the tribe, and Venus on one stroke.

"The Laja are on their way in great numbers to wipe out the Kalja to the smallest child." It was a guess. How good, Paul didn't know until later.

The chiefs stirred, cast glances to either side from under heavy brows, and stared again at the incomprehensible leader of this tribe. What was this hated Earthman doing here? What did he know? Why should they not kill him now and then turn upon the enemies beside them? Calg, hugest of them all, moved to Paul's side to lend support. Brun was absent.

"They are coming with their weapons that stun and kill at a distance," Paul continued in ringing tones. "They are coming with such numbers as you have never seen. A tribe alone has no chance against them. They will destroy the tribes one by one, as a few Kalja could destroy a hundred bears finding each alone."

This was language they had to understand in spite of themselves. There was a murmur, not entirely savage, not entirely hate or distrust. No longer did the chiefs eye each other; they stared at Paul, their gaze unreadable. Paul stood a little straighter.

"If any tribe is to live, all must fight together. A large stone in a river is tossed about until it is ground to dust, but if many stones fall together the river is held back and the stones remain whole."

This, too, the chiefs understood. They had seen the side of a mountain slide into a valley, dam up a huge river, and form behind a lake. From somewhere in the savage crowd a note of approval crept into the murmur.

"The tribes must unite if they would live," Paul shouted. "Together we can defy the green-faced Laja, sweep him back to his swamps, yes, and take the battle to his own ground! Together you can win life, freedom, victory! Alone, you are destroyed. Unite!"

The murmur of approval grew. But the Kalja were not so easily swayed. One of the

chiefs stepped forward, his brow knitting.

"Even if what you say were true, how can we trust our enemies to fight beside us. He who would kill me yesterday will kill me today or tomorrow."

"Where all have common interests and a common foe there are no enemies. Would you kill a man who fights for your tribe, your children?"

The chief nodded slowly and stepped back. Another moved forward to take his place.

"The Laja have never come before as you tell us they are coming now. They have come only in small parties and taken only a few for slaves. Why should they now come to destroy us?"

"There are evil white-skinned men, just as there are evil Kalja. Some of these white-faced devils have got power among the Laja. They are inciting them to wipe out the Kalja so that they may rule here without fear."

In the house Alice flushed with anger at the lie.

The chief stepped back, but there was a rumble of dissatisfaction. Another of the Kalja came forward.

"There can be no unity," he said darkly. "Where there is unity there must be a leader. We would have to fight among ourselves to determine who should lead, and the one who was left alive would still have no control over the tribes of the others. They would not follow him."

The balance teetered. The chief had reminded them of their age-old traditions of enmity. Their eyes turned narrow, suspicious, and red. Paul watched the fuse sputter toward the powder keg and waited for the moment when he must throw himself into the breach in one last desperate attempt. That moment never came. Instead a yell came from down the trail leading to the cliff dwelling of the tribe.

"The Laja! They are coming. I have seen them in their boats on the river."

The attention of the chiefs was diverted, their anger channeled toward the Laja. The tension relaxed; the balance swung back. In a moment Brun was among them, describing how, miles below, he had seen the Laja, great boats of them, landing on the bank of the river, forming and marching off. Their numbers were uncountable. No one had ever seen so many. And leading them were the white-skinned devils.

That brought them back to Paul. They turned again, facing him with new respect.

"As for a leader," he said, as if there had been no interruption, "in my country we choose leaders for their wisdom, not their strength. We select them by vote, one vote to a man, and bind ourselves to abide by the decision of the majority."

Calg started the shout.

"Paul! Paul! Let him be leader!"

"He conquered the foreign thing from the skies!" Brun added.

One after another the chiefs joined the shout until, soon, the mountains were echoing with Paul's name. Eventually Paul quieted them. After the ceremony of allegiance, he spread his hands out for silence.

"We will drive the Laja from the mountains," he said. "And then we will go to the swamps and destroy the devils who seek to rule everything. Now, go! Assemble your warriors, take your women and children to places of hiding where the Laja cannot find them, and return to this spot."

Paul turned and entered the house. Once within the shadows he was startled by a stinging slap on his cheek.

"You liar!" Alice hissed. "You disgusting liar! Oh, how I hate you!"

Paul lifted the tips of his fingers to his tingling cheek.

"I am tempted to say, my dear, that all measures are justified for freedom, but I do not believe it. Freedom does not need a lie to save it; only the truth can do it any good."

He bent down and lifted her lowered face with a finger beneath her chin.

"Someday you will see that for yourself."

"Never!" she said wildly. "Never!"

IV

THE mountain ridge was quiet but not deserted. Behind Paul a hundred or more Kalja warriors waited patiently for his orders. Paul, Brun, and Calg lay on their stomachs peering over the edge of the mountain into the valley below. There a river rushed its churned, white-frothed way to the swamps. There, on a natural trail beside the river, marched the Laja by thousands led by an Earthman. From the depths of the valley came only the echoes of many

feet and the muted commands of officers.

Paul turned to his lieutenants.

"The Kalja can never hope to defeat such an army in open battle," he whispered. "This is probably only a part of the force sent against the mountains. Not only do they outnumber the Kalja by at least ten to one, but your knives will be useless against the blasters and stunners they have available."

Calg nodded reluctantly.

"Your advantage lies in your knowledge of the mountains. You must make the most of it," Paul continued. "Harass them. Pick them off. Make their days dangerous and their nights unbearable. Never meet them face to face. Cut off their retreat where possible. Force them into new and more mountainous country. Stay above them."

A gleam appeared in Calg's eye. His nod was eager.

"Pattern your tactics after mine," Paul said, and, backing away from the rim of the cliff, moved parallel to the edge opposite the line of march of the Laja. Finally he found a spot to his liking.

"Look!" he said, pointing. "See where the edge of the cliff is cracked and crumbling. There is your chief weapon."

He motioned the warriors to roll boulders up to the edge. They fell to work.

"I know," said Brun, eagerly. "You will do as we did to the foreign thing from the sky."

"That's very good, Brun," Paul said. Brun flushed with pleasure. "But we will not try to wipe them out."

In short time the cliff's edge was lined with huge stones. Below, the ranks of the Laja had almost moved past. Paul held back the impatience of the Kalja to try the new weapon until the last one had almost escaped from below. Then he gave the signal.

The edge of the cliff trembled as the great rocks hit the slope below. Paul motioned the line of Kalja to a safer place where they knelt to watch. The mountainside rumbled and shook. The avalanche of irresistible rock grew.

The Laja looked up. A cloud of rock dust hid the cliff edge. The mountain was falling on them! They panicked at the sight of that descending wall of rock, split, ran in every direction.

The ones who chose to reverse their steps were luckless. They were buried beneath the slide that almost filled the valley, damming the river, blocking all retreat. The army left ahead of the slide, almost untouched, started up the side of the mountain at the command of their white leader.

Paul mustered his defences. His huge warriors rolled up boulder after boulder and shoved them over into the ranks of the climbing Laja. They wreaked terrible havoc. Crushing, smashing, alone, one out of three started a small slide that wiped out an entire company. In the face of that decimation the line wavered—and broke.

The officers below urged them up the cliff face again and again. They couldn't face that destruction. Soon it was too late. The dammed-up river had backed up until the Laja were wading. The white-skinned officer called off the attack. The Laja reformed, ignoring the intermittent hail of objects from above, and marched up the valley.

Paul called Calg to him.

"Take half the men," he said. "Follow them. Keep them busy. Don't let them get on the same level as you. Always keep above them. If you have to let them have a mountain, get away before they can come into range of you."

Calg nodded.

"Where do you go?" he asked.

"To carry the war to the enemy," Paul said grimly. "Instruct the other parties to search out other bands of Laja and cut off their retreat as we have with this one. Then have them retrace the Laja's route and at the end of it destroy the boats in which they came. Destroy them by rocks from above or by stealth at night."

Paul turned to Brun and instructed him to pick out fifty of the Kalja quickly.

"Good luck and good hunting," he said to Calg and he moved off in the direction the Laja troops had come. Brun followed him with the men he had chosen.

Night caught them still in the mountains, still without having caught sight of the boats which must have brought the Laja as far as possible up the river. Brun urged Paul to stop for the night, but Paul shook his head and kept on.

"We can't take the chance that the troops we ambushed might be able to get a mes-

senger back."

The mountain slopes were dangerous at night, slippery with rain, cluttered with loose rocks, but Paul moved along with catlike sureness of foot. With relief, however, Brun and his Kalja warriors, each of whom had stumbled several times, saw the light of fires in the distance. Soon they were above the camp, looking down on a scene of careless watch over the assembled barges drawn up at the river's bank.

Paul, studying the camp, was surprised by a sudden interruption in a breathless, feminine voice.

"Are you going to murder them as you did the others?"

Paul turned. Alice Dekker stood behind him, weaving with weariness, covered with bruises. Her clothes, which she had so painstakingly repaired, were once more torn and gaping, her alluring ivory flesh gleaming in fugitive flashes from the campfires below. The sight of her tore through Paul with the sword of desire. He tried to push it away. It was impossible; she hated him and would hate him more for what he had to do.

"What are you doing here?" he said harshly.

"Do you think I could wait in that rock heap for the Kalja to tear me to pieces?" she asked. "No, you are going where my father is. This is my only chance to get back to civilization. And besides," she smiled bitterly, tiredly, "I want to be there when my father defeats you."

"I left instructions for your care," Paul muttered futilely. "Did you follow us all the way over the mountains?"

She nodded.

"Ever since you ambushed the Laja. I repeat, are you going to murder them the same way?"

She took a step forward, staggered, and almost fell.

Paul yearned to take her in his arms, comfort her weariness, protect her soft body from the harsh cruelty of the Venusian mountains. Instead he turned his back to her and resumed his study of the campfires below.

"Not quite the same," he said coldly. "Brun!" he called. "Take care of this woman. See that no harm comes to her."

He turned his head slightly, his voice lower.

"We can't leave you on the mountains alone. I will deliver you to the loving arms of your father."

But the arms about her were Brun's hairy ones. She had fainted.

Paul called his warriors about him and gave them explicit instructions. Then they carefully, silently, descended the mountain side.

The Laja were carelessly lolling about their fires, sleepily stretching themselves in the warmth they enjoyed, never venturing too far into the chill outside the campfires' reach, secure in the strength of their numbers and their weapons.

The attack, when it came, was unexpected and devastating. From all sides the Kalja warriors swarmed. The Laja could not even reach their weapons before the tide of hard mountain flesh rolled over them, smothering them, smashing them. It was carnage.

When the tide lifted there were no Laja left alive. Against the repugnance of the Kalja, Paul insisted that the Laja weapons be taken with them. Then he directed the destruction of all the barges except two, a large one and a smaller one.

Into the large one he bundled most of the warriors and lashed the smaller one to its side. The rest of the warriors, Brun, Alice, and Paul climbed into it. Again he had to fight against the superstitious fear of the Kalja for the new and different, but again he dominated them by the strength of his will and the awe in which they held his abilities, seemingly touched with nothing but victory.

Paul started the motors. They woke echoes among the mountains in the night's stillness. The moorings were thrown off, and, under Paul's guiding hand, the barges moved sluggishly into the swift, dark river. Faster and faster they went as the current caught them, swinging them dangerously close at times to the rocky, jagged banks, carrying them in a desperate raid into a strange country where they were a handful against an army, where a single cry would bring them swift, certain death.

THE rotting, fetid swamps were everywhere around them. The smell of them was never out of their nostrils. They sat quiet, unmoving, in the barges but their eyes were on a glow on the horizon—the

swamp city. They had come so far half by caution, half by luck. They had tied up the previous night still in the mountains. The next evening they had come down swiftly. From here until the end it would take speed and daring; caution's use was past.

"Go to the most deserted of the docks," Paul instructed Brun. "Be quiet, stealthy, but when you are once seen, strike swiftly and fight as quickly as possible to the central square."

Brun nodded.

"The woman?"

"She goes with me in the little boat. You know how to run your barge. We practiced with the weapons yesterday. Use them!"

The distrust of the Kalja for foreign weapons had been overcome when they saw the results of the puny weapons. Brun nodded again.

"Don't stop for battle. Break through and keep going."

Paul cast off the smaller boat after Brun had transferred himself and his men to the barge. Only he and Alice were left, and the girl was asleep. One wave of his hand and the boats were apart, separated by a thick curtain of night and intermittent mist. Once more Paul was alone.

The small deserted dock was lonely and unlighted in the night. The small boat drifted to it slowly, and Paul eased it to a stop. Suddenly something flashed by him, onto the dock, and into the night.

"Alice!" he cried, in spite of himself, but it was too late. She was gone.

He sprang to the dock and ran after her. There were a dozen side streets and alleys she could have disappeared into, and the night was impenetrable. There was no time.

He began to run, lightly, easily, on his toes, with an effortless stride that ate up the distance and could be continued for miles. It carried him into the night. Finally he came out of the dock and industrial area into the better lighted streets of the business section.

Green-faced Laja whose work took them into the streets in the darkness of early morning turned to stare goggle-eyed at the flashing golden figure. They shrugged it off. They had grown used to the Earthmen and had given up trying to fathom their peculiarities.

After several miles Paul began to slow up. The street was widening. He dropped to a walk. Ahead he caught a glimpse of the large central square. He began to walk in the shadows.

When he reached the boundaries of the square his step was catlike and his progress was almost imperceptible. It was fortunate that it was. Past the edge of the square walked a sentry, an Earthman, cautious, watchful, his hand hovering near his gun.

Paul cast a glance around the corner of the building after the guard had passed. Another Earthman was pacing opposite the first, each watching the other as they patrolled the square.

Paul waited. The footsteps of the guard approached. Paul watched the other guard closely. A big yawn closed up his eyes for a moment, and he smothered his face in his hand. At that instant the guard moved opposite Paul.

With one swift motion like a tiger, Paul sprang, bringing the edge of his palm in a short chopping motion against the guard's temple, catching the collapsing body in his arms, tossing it into the shadows as he removed the gun from the holster, and stepping into the routine the guard had left.

Across the square, through the mist, his figure could not be distinguished from the guard's, Paul knew. He watched the other guard carefully, but he had just finished his yawn and brought his hand away.

Paul continued his imitation of the guard he had replaced until he was nearing the palace. There a small side street cut into the square. As he came opposite it, he stopped, stared, and moved into it, his gun out. Across the square, after him, came the other guard, running, his gun ready. As the guard came into the shadows a chopping gun butt caught him on the back of the head. He dropped without a sound.

Paul quickly turned and moved up the steps of the palace. He tried the big doors at the front. They refused to move. A smaller door at the side, moved open at his touch, however. Paul stepped into perfect blackness, easing the door shut behind him. He stood listening. Not a sound broke the silence.

He moved quietly along the wall until he found the door. He pulled at it gently, and it started open. A bright ray of light shot into the room. Paul put his eye to the

crack. In front of him a large body shut out sight of the room within. Conversation drifted through the opening.

"Almost finished. Just stick in these wires . . ."

Paul recognized that voice—Alex Dekker!

"What's so important that we gotta stay up all night?"

"Once we have this radio going," Alex said, "we can do a lot of things. We can call in help, for instance."

"You mean so the rest of the boys who've been hidin' out can make it here?"

PAUL pulled back the door, chopped down at the base of the guard's skull, and stood over him, his gun ready, when he fell in a heap on the floor. The room was a large one and brightly lighted. At the far end of it was a table supporting an imposing array of wires and tubes. Bending over it was Alex. Standing startled at the other two doors were two more guards. Otherwise the room was bare.

"Drop the guns," Paul said savagely.

The guns, which were half out of the guards' holsters, were lifted gingerly and released to clatter on the stone floor.

"Come to the center of the room," he said. They came, slowly, reluctantly, but they came.

"All right, Alex," Paul said, "pick up that wrench on your bench."

Alex started at the sound of his name. His eyes narrowed, but he complied with the order.

"Now, knock them out!"

Paul waved his blaster suggestively.

Alex hit them solidly one after the other. They fell to the floor, soddenly. He looked up.

"Well?" he said.

"Any others?" Paul asked.

"The two outside and one of the Laja in the next room there."

"Call him in!"

Alex went to the door, opened it, and called. His shoulders twitched with the desire to break and run, but he restrained the impulse. The Laja entered, staring curiously at the stranger with the weapon. It was the green-faced leader who had risen to object at the conference.

"I wanted you here as a witness," Paul said in the Laja language. "I arrest you, Alex Dekker, in the name of freedom and for your offenses against it."

Alex smiled—not prettily.

"So you're one of those," he said. "It won't do you any good to arrest me. You could never get out of this city alive, with or without me. I suggest you hand over that blaster to me, and I might send you back to Freedom, Inc., in one piece."

"You will return to Earth to answer for your crimes against freedom committed there and on Mars."

"You forget," said Alex. "Your organization is unofficial and has no right to try or judge anyone. No. There is no legal or physical reason for me to go with you."

Paul's voice was steely.

"Over a year ago the governments of Earth and Mars passed laws which embodied the suggestions of Freedom, Inc., and deputized its members to enforce those laws wherever and whenever broken. Consider yourself under arrest."

There was a flicker of movement just beyond the range of Paul's eye to the left.

"Don't move, Paul," came the firm voice of Alice Dekker. "I have a blaster."

"My finger is on the trigger," Paul said steadily. "If you move to fire, your father will die."

"It seems we have a stalemate," Alex said cheerfully. "Nice work, Alice. I've been in need of a rest."

"Alice!" Paul said urgently. "Your father is a criminal, wanted on Earth and Mars . . ."

"That's nonsense, my dear," Alex broke in smoothly. "The governments of Earth and Mars are tyrannies. Having driven out the people's government, of which I was a member on each planet, they have set out to hound us to death."

"Why didn't you send a rescue party, father?" asked Alice evenly.

Alex hesitated.

"Why, we did, my dear, as soon as possible. We were busy, you see . . ."

"I see," she said wearily. "The men were right. You are my father, though. I can't see you taken away for something you didn't do."

"Alice," began Paul, "have you ever heard . . . ?"

"Don't listen to him, Alice," Alex broke in. "He will do anything, say anything to

try to get you to put down your gun. You'd better give it to me . . ."

Two guns motioned him to stay in his place.

"Alice!" he exclaimed.

"I want to hear what he has to say," she said.

"Have you ever heard of Freedom, Inc.?" Paul asked.

She nodded.

"I see you have. I am a member, having been sent a month ago to bring this man—Alex Dekker—to justice. I parachuted into the mountains a little more than a week ago to unify the mountain tribes. They had to be strong enough to prevent being wiped out by the attacks planned by your father. Now I have come for your father."

HER heart pounded at the thought of what this single man with his bare hands had attempted—the virtual conquest of a planet—and accomplished.

"Your father is the head of a band of interplanetary gangsters who seized control of the governments of Earth and Mars and held them for most of your life. But a year ago the people of those planets arose and threw them out of their dictatorial powers. Both Mars and Earth are busy cleaning up the remnants of these gangsters; they can spare neither ships nor men for Venus."

"And you came," she said.

"You, Laja!" Paul said. "What has this man done for you?"

Surprisingly, the Laja leader spoke bitterly.

"Nothing," he said. "He has promised much but done nothing. He is not good."

"Would it not be better to live in peace with the Kalja?" Paul said.

"Yes," the Laja said. "Yes. That would be good."

"All this talk is useless," said Alex. "You cannot remove me from the city."

"Listen!" said Paul.

In the distance could be heard a sound of great commotion, the sound of guns, of fighting, of shouts—the croaking of the Laja, the deep bass voices of the Kalja.

Alice's gun dropped to her side.

"Oh, Paul!" she cried.

He half turned to her, feeling her distress, instinctively wanting to comfort the wound the news of her father's worthlessness had made. In that moment, Alex acted.

He slipped through the door and was gone.

With a leap, Paul was after him. He tore open the door. The sound of running footsteps told him Alex had gone toward the front, toward the square. He sprinted in that direction. Reaching the front door, he threw it open.

The battle had reached the square. The Kalja had broken through and were forming to hold back the Laja from entering. Brun turned, saw Paul, and started, grinning, toward him. Paul searched the square. Where was Alex?

Brun saw him before Paul did, and a roar of hatred came from his throat. Alex was climbing into a one-seater reconnaissance ship in the shadows of the palace. When Brun got to the ship, Alex had pulled the cover down over his head.

Brun grimaced with hatred and began pounding on the transparent cover with his fist and with the gun he held in the other. They were tremendous blows; the craft rocked and vibrated to them. The plastic bulged, split, one great hand reached in. At that moment the ship started.

It took off erratically, climbing in darts and jumps. One reason may have been Brun's heavy weight hanging to one side; the other was probably because the pilot was strangling to death. Finally Brun dropped. His massive figure came hurtling down, hundreds of feet, and thudded into the square.

When Paul reached him he was dead. Paul looked up to see Alice beside him. He put one arm around her, drawing her face away, before he looked back at Brun. Brun had died happy. He was smiling.

Paul took Alice back to the palace. She was shaking in his arms.

"Paul," she said. "Hold me. Hold me tight. Never let me go."

"I won't," he said, and kissed her. She stopped shaking and clung to him.

When they were back in the room with the radio, Paul tapped out the message which would cross the gulf of space between Venus and the next two planets from the sun.

"Freedom, Inc.—For Venus: freedom."
—Paul Adams.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(*Continued from page* 3)

rocket falls freely with downward acceleration exactly equalling the earth's gravity. The monkeys and mice apparently got through it all right. All the monkeys actually slept through their 2,000 mile an hour ride because they were anesthetized with morphine. As they rode in the nose of the rocket they were equipped with instruments for measuring pulse, breathing, heart action and blood pressure—and the information was radioed back to the Earth all during flight. The mice were not given any morphine. Their chamber was equipped with a device in which they were free to run and jump—and all the time their antics were being automatically photographed. During the "weightless" stage of three minutes, the mice literally floated in their rocket-nose cabin—but after the descending nose reached a point where gravity again took over, the mice hopped around normally just as though nothing had happened."

Think what this means to science fiction fandom. Monkeys and mice have been used for centuries to test serums and cures for diseases that were later used successfully on man. All or anyway most successful treatments on these animals later became useful to our society. Is this not an exciting thing? It is not a speculation but a fact. Concrete evidence that something can live, can withstand the pressure of rocket-blast, can survive having no weight. Something living has been to space and is back still living. If mice could only talk.

I suppose this will bring back the stories of Mitkey, the space mouse, for a new era of heroism. Those fans who are depressed about the supposition that Martians are moss, can take heart. After all space is filled with cosmic dust and matter which probably interferes with our telescopes getting a clear view of other worlds. Soon we will see for ourselves. If the mice can make it so can we. I can see the citizens of Venus greeting one of our rockets with "Are you a man or a mouse?" Either answer will some day be a heroic one, don't you think?

Sincerely,

HELEN HUBER

TOLERANTER

79th A. B. Sq.
Sioux City, Iowa

Dear Ed:

This teen-age-adult squabble has reached a point where I feel the desire to add a few comments of my own. Certainly you'll find a number of young people reading S-F. More power to 'em, say I. I'm one of them. I also enjoy a variety of stories—anything from pure space opera to the serious and technical type of story. That is, I enjoy them when they're well written and entertaining. The fact that a story is juvenile or adolescent in tone doesn't mean I'll like it.

Just because a person is young in years and experience, he doesn't have to be young mentally or emotionally. I think you'll find that most of your younger readers are much more mature than the average person of the same age. Probably the readers are more intelligent as well. It goes without saying that their imaginations are more fully developed.

This argument has been going on for some time, and I'm probably sticking my neck out by offering my opinion. I don't care, though. It's about time the younger generation talked back to the older generation. The things we have to put up with from you older folks would try the patience of a saint. "Problem children" is a common enough phrase, but there are just as many "problem adults." Adults are older, and "know better" and anyone who thinks differently had just better keep it to himself. It's safer. Why not give us a chance to prove that we can be just as mature and selective about our reading matter as you oldsters? Youth, I believe, is much more tolerant than age.

And just for the record, I'll be seventeen in April.

MARIAN COX

A QUESTION OF TIME

816 Soledad Ave.
Santa Barbara
California

Impersonal Robot:

WAR-MAID OF MARS sounds more like a statement of PLANET'S policy than a story; glad to see the owlies back, though. In THE RELUCTANT COLONIST, the author built up rather well to the revelation (i. e., the solution to the plague problem), but then he seemed to stumble around a bit in a mess of words about some rather vague research, or something. The last half of the story was quite weak.

Favorite in the issue, for a completely unknown reason, was DOOMSDAY 257 A. G.! . . . Somehow, Walton's obvious style seemed pleasurable, however unsubtle. I think it was just the flavor of the story, which didn't try to dress up an empty theme (as Poul Anderson did) but which was admittedly hack and enjoyable by virtue of this admission.

Mavis, since you seem to be the chief scientist among the moon-maids, will you please explain why such high escape velocities are necessary? The figure of seven miles a second applies only to a projectile which receives its impetus initially upon leaving the earth. It is unpowered afterward. Airplanes and helicopters leave the surface of the earth every day at speeds incomprehensibly slow, by Rocketmen's standards. Yet the attraction of gravity is greater between an object on the earth and the earth, than between an object five miles up and the earth. Therefore the amount of power needed to get something off the earth is the most that is ever needed, and this is small indeed! It seems to me to be a question of TIME rather than of power; that is, how can you get enough fuel to keep a ship going until it escapes the earth's gravitational field. Please quote me Dr. Von Braun's calculations which show that a slower-moving rocket must return to earth . . . given unlimited fuel supply.

Lovingly as ever,

S. VERNON MCDANIEL

OUT FROM UNDER

2025 Franklin Avenue N. E.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Dear Ed:

I wrote my last letter to the Vizigraph just at the dusk of the Brackett renaissance. (That pleasant period of Brackett novels before darkness and Poul Anderson descended upon all planet fandom.) Shortly after that time, in view of the bleak future predicted by Anderson's darkness, I decided to withdraw from the fold and become a doddering old hermit until PLANET'S policies once more became harmonious with my tastes.

In your March issue you showed a very favorable sign, but just one. That's all. That sign was Gardner F. Fox, one of PLANET'S old time thud and blunder exponents. This man writes well. He devotes time

and effort to every paragraph. He plots excellently for this type of literature, and he writes very well. My heart leaped at sight of his name on the cover. TONIGHT THE STARS REVOLT was great. It was vivid; it was realistic; it was Fox of the old PLANET. The PLANET that used Martin for covers, and Martin and McWilliams and Anderson for the inside pictures. (Good pictures! Well drawn illustrations.)

The latter-day PLANET has had so much of Vestal that he apparently had to worry more about the quantity than the quality of his drawings and therefore has done a crumby job on almost everything he has turned out during this time. Vestal is an old-timer too in PLANET'S ranks, but back in the good old days his efforts were excellent.

Another thing. The latter-day PLANET features Poul Anderson until the cover femmes are blue in the face. Poul Anderson is a good writer, but he can't write this kind of stuff the way it should be written. Not the way the Williams taste likes it, anyway. He plays too much on the wrong emotions. I have never been able to read one of his yarns yet without noticing that be every now and then sweats blood trying to rend the reader's little heart with compassion. And he does an awful job of it. It is impossible to identify yourself with his characters because he does too obvious a job trying to characterize them. Characterization is the most important thing in a story, and it is PA's weakest point.

Now, though, with GFFOX's TTSR in print in the March ish, it giffs hint of perhaps reversions to the good old days. Then too, the May issue, though resembling its motley predecessors in form, was fairly good in spite of it all. Things maybe aren't so hopeless after all. I may stay out of my cave long enough to observe a few issues in broad daylight. 1952 may bring back that lost PLANET that I liked so well.

MARVIN WILLIAMS

Ed's note: Cheer up, Marv. L. Brackett will be on hand in the November number to brighten your dark world.

THE ISLE IS CALLING

84 Wyke Road
Trowbridge
Wiltshire
England

Dear Jack:

Blessings upon your head. Got the mags this morning and boy, was I glad. I've been reading STF for two years now, and this is the first time I have been able to read a fairly current letter section.

'Tec fiction, which I read when I was young and foolish, cannot hold a candle to STF. If someone offered me a choice of 100,000 'tec magazines or 100 STF's, I'd take the latter every time.

Should very much like to hear from fen in the U. S. A.

Gratefully,
NORMAN G. WANSBOROUGH

TO ARMS

1853 Stralfort Avenue
Bridgeport, 7, Conn.

Dear Ed:

I write this as an open letter to all science-fiction fen.

In reading PLANET and many other pulps and slicks I have noted stories and articles relating to the quality and quantity of STF movies . . . but it seems to me that they ignore the most important medium of all—radio. Radio reaches more people and makes more converts to STF than any other medium. And our help is needed right now.

I present the cases of DIMENSION X (N.B.C.) and 2000 PLUS (M.B.S.): these two programs, perhaps the best of the current crop, have been removed from the air waves. And what did we fen do? Ha! Nothing.

So how about protesting and flooding the desks of the production managers of these networks with mail until they cry "Martian Uncle."

Truly yours,
WM. MULLARKEY, JR.

SUGAR AND CORN

36 Nelson St.
Quincy 69, Mass.

Dear Editor,

My head turned hazy and I gasped,
I teetered, tottered, and collapsed.
The May cover was striking but please get hep,
How awful corny can you get?

Quickly now before I faint,
I must put down my brief complaint.
Alas, I know it won't be done
An *ishue* without Anderson.
His head must have a deep depression
Warrior maids are his obsession.

Your explanation as to why
The fems are lightly clad
Was enough to quickly drive
Both me and others mad.
But I'll go on and read some more
It's still the best pulp in the store.

Sincerely,
ARTHUR SELIN

THE INS vs. THE OUTS

761 Oakley Street
Salt Lake City 16, Utah

Dear Jack:

Even an Irishman would shudder at that letter Mrs. Mary Wallace Corby had in the May issue of PS. Gads! How can the woman stand there and make such statements without a lick of proof, support, or what-have-you, and admit her own inadequacy to judge at the same time? I guess it takes a woman to do that.

She doesn't collect STF or fantasy because "they are very much overpriced for the worth of their contents." Nonsense, sheer nonsense. For the first thing, what does the act of collection do with value or worth? Nothing. Then she says: "Very few books in the field are worth their cost." More nonsense. For the penny-pinching or underpaid fan, there are the Grosset and Dunlap dollar specials that have presented some darn fine stuff recently, and have more good material coming up. What's wrong there? And a $3.00 book (overlooking the many $2.00 and $2.50 books in the field) only costs you a penny a page and has a hard-cover around it besides. And they are usually the books of the best STF in the field. So there are some lemons—so what. Aren't there lemons in everything?

Then she says: "Magazines are worth their original cost, but not the ridiculous amounts they bring after a few years." Hah! Who is she to judge worth,

MURDER



A KILLER'S FOOTSTEPS SLITHERING SOFTLY IN THE GLOOM, MOONLIGHT GLINTING ON A WEAPON —THEN THE MERCILESS STROKE OF MURDER!

Hand-picked murder! The editors of TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS, surveying the current published mysteries, carefully select the cream of the crop, and hand you, in each issue of the magazine, hours of thrills. You get two of the best, most exciting mystery novels to appear in book form—and you get them complete. If you don't know TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS, get acquainted today. You'll find this bargain magazine at all newsstands—a $4 value for 25¢. In the current issue:

The Cocktail Murders
by FREDERICK DAVIS

Passing Strange
by RICHARD SALE

TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS

Published by
REAL ADVENTURES PUBLISHING COMPANY, Inc.
114 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.

when by her own admission she is "not a fan in the accepted sense of the word" and does "not collect STF or fantasy" and "doesn't belong to any fan club or subscribe to any fanzine." Unless, of course, (and there is the off chance that this is true) she means by "worth" the actual value the pulp is worth if remashed and printed. Then, perhaps, the mags aren't worth the prices they bring because, after all, the pulp gets a little brittle after twenty years or so. But if she means worth as something aside from actual value, then old mags certainly are worth the prices they bring, or it stands to reason they wouldn't bring them. Right?

And, Jack, if you did as she said and checked the circulation department, I'm sure you *would* find that there *are* more readers like her than "dyed-in-the-wool fans." Sure, but are they worth it? Fans give you many, many dollars' worth of plugs and advertisement per year by means of their fanzines. Not only that, but the dyed-in-the-wool fans are those same ones who put on a World convention each year and really make the papers sit back and recognize S-F for what it is. This boosts circulation quite a bit, I'd imagine. Besides, these dyed-in-the-wool fans religiously buy your every issue, and tell you what they liked and what they didn't like and why, so that you can get a general measuring stick of material quality. These things must be true, or why do so many promags give fen the notice they are?

And what do fen like Mrs. Corby give you besides an occasional letter and a copy every two months? Sure, there are more of them than there are of us, but how do we balance up? I hope I'm not sounding conceited, but I would like to present my views just the same.

To price-conscious non-collector-because-they-aren't-worth-it Mrs. Corby I offer my sympathies—she doesn't know what she's missing. And any fan who hasn't belonged to a STFclub or read a fanzine isn't worth the name of "fan." Don't stay on the outside too long, Mrs. C—after the Chicago convention this year fandom will grow mightily from the publicity, and you'd better watch your ranks to see that we don't outgrow you.

Sincerely,

GREGG CALKINS

" 'TIL MERCURY FREEZES OVER"

1628 Midway
Modesto, Calif.

Dear Old Editor,

It is now 4 a.m. of a fine March morning, and I have just finished reading the VIZIGRAPH section in my first issue of PLANET STORIES. I can't go to sleep until I get in the middle of a couple of the current feuds.

The big feud concerns these Anti-Bradbury people. I was only introduced to STF last summer, so I haven't read an awful lot. I have read, however, two of Mr. B's books—THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, and THE ILLUSTRATED MAN. I have also read his stories in the many fine anthologies in which he is included, to say nothing of stories in Mags. I think he has overworked nothing; that each story is presented to you with a new perspective; and as far as I am concerned, he can write until Mercury freezes over, and I will never tire of him. I might add that I only bought my initial copy of PS because I had seen that name on many of the copyrights for his other stories.

I have a pet gripe. (Don't we all?) I wish people would stop referring to classics of the field which were published ages ago. My reason is not that I am not interested—it is just the opposite. I am so interested that I immediately try to find a copy of a mag or book wherein the story is obtained, that I am slowly becoming bankrupt due to my success, and frustrated due to my failures. So please, folks, don't do this to me.

Yours for bigger and better BEM's,

BOB FLINT

THE END OF "ENDLESS SUFFERING"

10721 Wellworth
Los Angeles, 24, Calif.

Sir:

In the March issue appears a letter by Edwin Sigler with which I should like to express my complete agreement.

PLANET'S lack of any remote approximation to literary merit is too obvious to require elaboration here. To use Sigler's own quaint phraseology, ". . . my stomach turned over at the stories. They were awful."

I also concur with Sigler's second point, *i.e.*, the impossibility of his being insulted by certain of PLANET'S readers. If we define an "insult" as a statement attributing to an individual undesirable traits which he does not actually possess, then, evidently, it would be impossible for Mr. Wigodsky or anyone else to insult Edwin Sigler: his pusillanimous conduct forcibly demonstrates that any characteristic, however base and despicable, may be predicated of him without serious error. It seems paradoxical that the racial superiority doctrine's most outspoken supporters constitute, themselves, the poorest arguments for its validity: if these persons are examples of Anglo-Saxon pre-eminence, then, clearly, the other "races" need suffer no apprehension.

The editor of PLANET occasionally prints certain pathological utterances, in the belief that he is thereby doing his duty in giving "both sides" of the question. Such an attitude ignores one basic point, namely, that while certain opinions entail no serious consequences should they be false, others, if not true, can be extremely harmful: if I believe that the sky will remain clear, and a thunderstorm occurs instead, I merely get my clothes drenched; on the other hand, if I drink the contents of a bottle of sulphuric acid under the impression that it contains water, the results will be quite unpleasant.

Any doctrine which can cause endless suffering ought to be carefully examined before being presented. In this particular case, even if there were evidences of its being true—and the vast amount of data, compiled to date, indicates otherwise—the editor should exercise a little caution before giving "both sides" of the question.

Concerning Sigler's neutrality and his indignant protests that he is merely presenting the unbiased results of his findings, I can do no better than to adapt a saying of Samuel Johnson:

Sigler is quite impartial; he lies of everybody.

Sincerely,

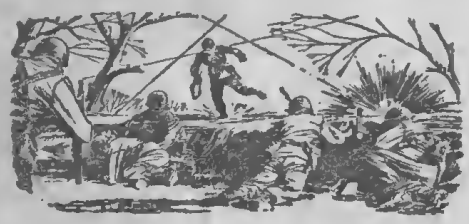
LELAND SAPIRO

Captain Raymond Harvey Medal of Honor





THE 17TH INFANTRY REGIMENT was attacking Hill 1232 near Taemi-Doug, Korea. Able and Baker Companies became split by a Red-held ridge. Charlie Company, Captain Harvey commanding, was moving up to fill the gap when the dug-in Red guns pinned it down. Calling for covering fire,



Captain Harvey advanced *alone* through a hail of enemy bullets. One by one, he personally wiped out four emplacements of machine guns and automatic weapons. Then he caught a bullet through the lung. But he stayed on, refusing evacuation, until sure the objective had been won.

"In Korea," says Captain Harvey, "we stopped aggression by *united* strength. *You* were helping—every time you bought a Defense Bond. Because your Defense Bonds were doing more than just helping keep you, and your family, and your country financially stable. They were backing *us* up in the field with *American production power*, the surest support any fighting man can have!

"I hope you'll go on buying Bonds—many, many of them. For your Bonds—and our bayonets—are making America strong. And in today's cold-warring world, *peace is only for the strong.*"

★ ★ ★

Remember that when you're buying bonds for national defense, you're also building a personal reserve of cash savings. Remember, too, that if you don't save *regularly*, you generally don't save at all. So sign up today in the Payroll Savings Plan where you work, or the Bond-A-Month Plan where you bank. For your country's security, and your own, buy United States Defense Bonds now!

Peace is for the strong... Buy U.S. Defense Bonds now!

The U. S. Government does not pay for this advertisement. It is donated by this publication in cooperation with the Advertising Council and the Magazine Publishers of America.

UNUSUAL PIPES FOR COLLECTORS AND SMOKERS WHO WANT THE BEST

ORDER BY MAIL—SAVE UP TO 50%

Collector's TYROL Pipe

A Mark Foster exclusive!

The driest smoking pipe I ever puffed on. Imported Briar bowl can be detached from all-briar shank. Finished in gleaming walnut color, waxed and polished. Gravity flow easily eliminated by removing bone plug in bottom of shank 6¾" high. A stand-out in any collection.



$2.95 EA.

LIMITED QUANTITY—ORDER NOW!

SEND NO MONEY

FREE ROLL-UP POUCH



This handy pouch holds pipe and tobacco. Made to sell for $1.00—it's yours *free* with every order of $5.00 or more.

MARK FOSTER

Foster Products, Inc., Dept. WFH
179 Wooster St., New York 12, N. Y.

Please send the items checked below. On arrival I will pay postman prices indicated plus small postage and C. O. D. charge. If not completely satisfied with my purchase, I may return it within 5 days, unsmoked for full purchase price refund. Please send "ROLL-UP POUCH" absolutely free if my purchase is $5.00 or more.

- "Tyrols" at $2.95
- "E-Z KLEENS" at $1.69 (2 for $2.98)
- "Churchwardens" at $2.95
- "Weichsels" at $2.95
- "Huntsman" at $2.95
- Pot-Luck Slot Machines at $2.98
- "Dippers" at $3.69

Name.....

Address.....

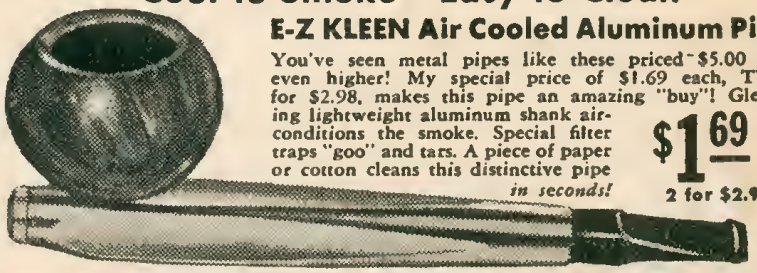
City.....*Zone*.....*State*.....

☐ Check here if you enclose full payment now. We pay postage and C.O.D. charges. Same free gift and refund offer.

YOUR dollar buys twice as much at these amazingly low prices! Every pipe guaranteed to add distinction to your collection. Every pipe guaranteed to be the coolest, sweetest-smoking briar you ever owned —OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

Cool to Smoke—Easy to Clean

E-Z KLEEN Air Cooled Aluminum Pipe



You've seen metal pipes like these priced $5.00 and even higher! My special price of $1.69 each, TWO for $2.98, makes this pipe an amazing "buy"! Gleaming lightweight aluminum shank air-conditions the smoke. Special filter traps "goo" and tars. A piece of paper or cotton cleans this distinctive pipe *in seconds!*

$1.69 EA.
2 for $2.98

Two Pipes In One!
TWO-STEM "CHURCHWARDEN"

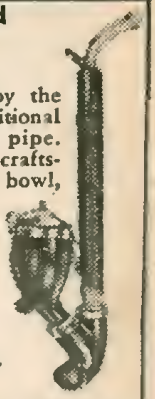


You really get two pipes for the price of one! Both stems fit the same bowl—use the short one for outdoors, and relax with the long one at home.

Genuine aged imported flair-grained briar. Shank reinforced with large size genuine sterling silver band. Complete with two stems—lengths 11 in. and 6 in.

$2.98 EA.

Unique Imported Czech Pipe!
WEICHSEL



You can now enjoy the zesty tang of the traditional Bohemian peasant pipe. Made by old-world craftsmen. Genuine briar bowl, fragrant cherry stem, rust-proof ferrules and bowl lid, moisture trap in socket, genuine horn bit, and gaily beaded tassel.

$2.95 EA.

A Collector's Gem!
HUNTSMAN



Another unusual Bohemian pipe I imported direct from Czechoslovakia. For a new smoking thrill, add this rare and beautiful old-world pipe to your collection. Genuine briar bowl packs a heap of cool, sweet smoking. Has hinged lid for draft control. Length 6¼ inches. Removable bottom for easy cleaning.

$2.95 EA.

Amazing Fun!
POT-LUCK Slot Machine

Just press the lever and watch the regulation cherries, bells, lemons, plums go 'round, just like the "real thing"! And what a thrill to hit the jackpot! Ideal for parties. Made of durable steel, handsomely designed. Complete with chips and instructions. Portable and inexpensive!



$2.98 EA.

"DIPPER"—The Sensation of the Season!

Sold for as much as $12.50



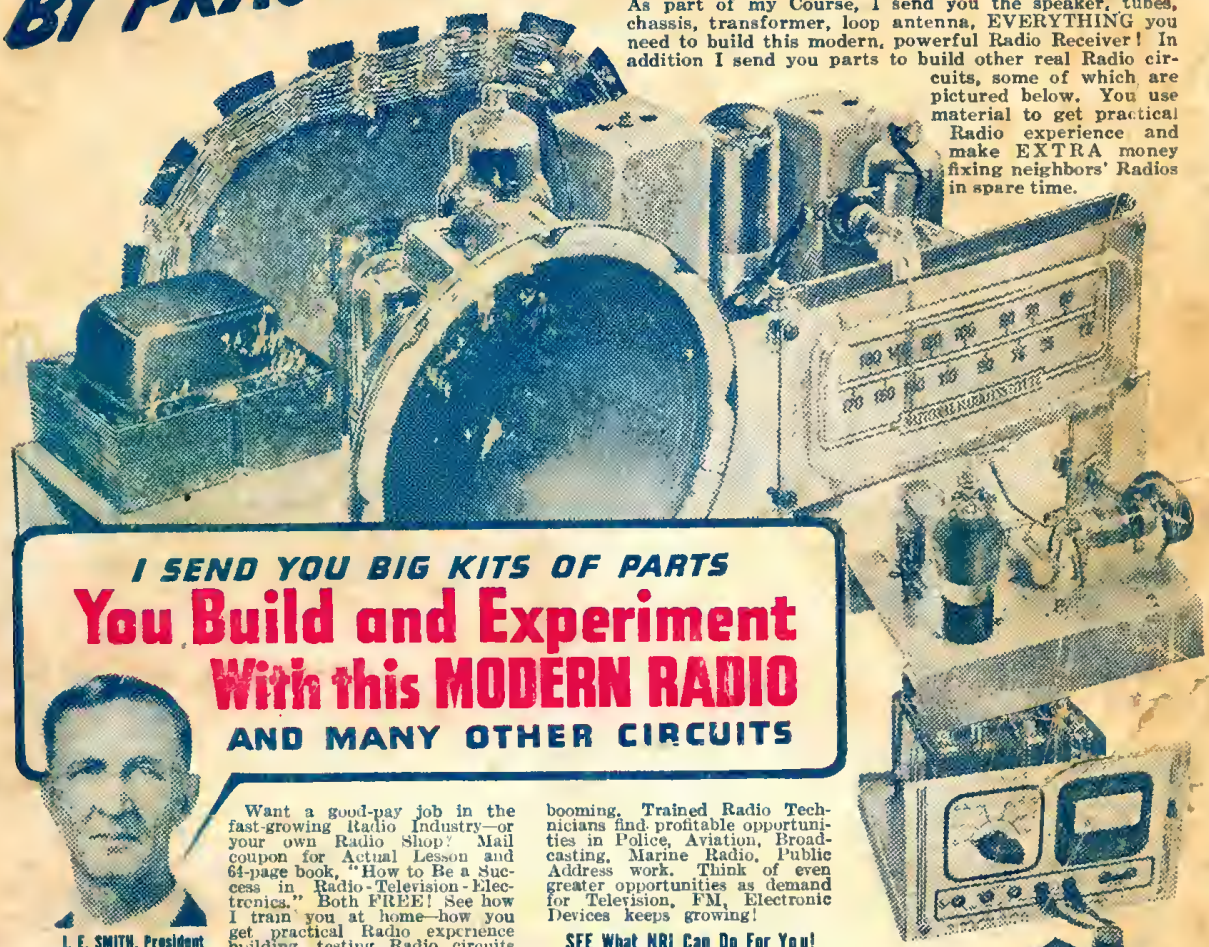
$3.69 EA.

These are rare "limited edition" pipes, for only the most perfect age-old briar can be used. ⅛" thick bowl cools the smoke. Pipe length 5½". Bowl Ht. 1¼". Bowl Diam. 2¼". Wt. 2½ oz.

LEARN RADIO

BY PRACTICING IN SPARE TIME

As part of my Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! In addition I send you parts to build other real Radio circuits, some of which are pictured below. You use material to get practical Radio experience and make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time.



I SEND YOU BIG KITS OF PARTS

You Build and Experiment With this MODERN RADIO

AND MANY OTHER CIRCUITS

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

Want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail coupon for Actual Lesson and 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television-Electronics." Both FREE! See how I train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with BIG KITS OF PARTS I send.

Make EXTRA Money While Learning

The day you enroll I send EXTRA money manuals, show you how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. It's probably easier than ever to start now, because Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Broadcasting, Marine Radio, Public Address work. Think of even greater opportunities as demand for Television, FM, Electronic Devices keeps growing!

SEE What NRI Can Do For You!

Mail Coupon for FREE Lesson and 64-page book. Read details about my Course, letters from men I trained about what they now earn. See how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Mail Coupon in envelope or paste on penny postal. Send NOW!

J. E. SMITH, Pres.,
Dept. 8JG National Radio Inst., Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN



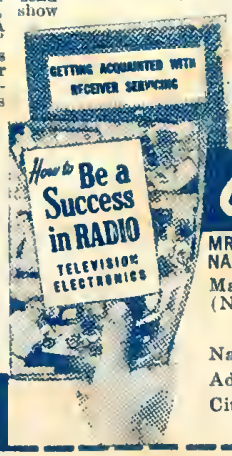
"AM NOW GETTING $60 a week and overtime as Radio Serviceman for The Adams Appliance Co."—W. A. ANGEL, Blythesville, Arkansas.



"KNEW NOTHING ABOUT RADIO when I enrolled. Now am doing spare time work. I have more than paid for my Course and about $200 worth of equipment."—RAYMOND HOLTCAMP, Vandalia, Ill.

VETERANS

You can get this training under G. I. Bill. Mail Coupon.



My Course Includes Training in
TELEVISION • ELECTRONICS
FREQUENCY MODULATION

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8JG
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE Sample Lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Age

Name

Address

City Zone State

☐ Check if Veteran